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Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro
The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

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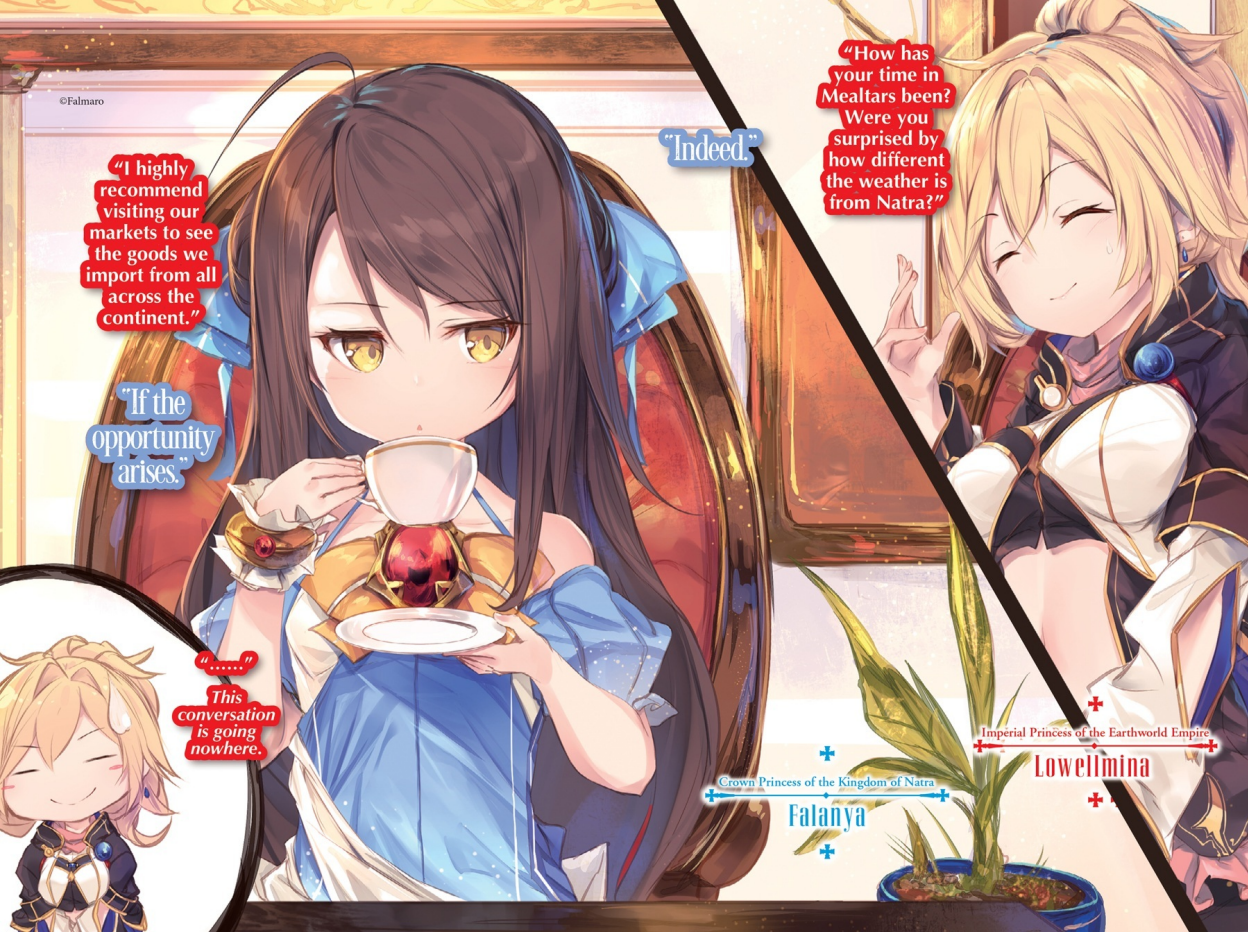
"I highly recommend visiting our markets to see the goods we import from all across the continent."
"If the opportunity arises."
"Indeed."
"How has your time in Mealtars been? Were you surprised by how different the weather is from Natra?"
"....."
This conversation is going nowhere.
Crown Princess of the Kingdom of Natra
Falanya
Imperial Princess of the Earthworld Empire
Lowellmina

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"And don't forget to be careful out there. With you looking so cute, I imagine men are going to try to chat you up outside of the political sphere. Turn them down."
"Please, Wein. You don't have to tell me twice."
"I'M WORRIED SICK...!"
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"It's been a while."
"You made it."
"Wein! Ninym! Long time no see."
Glen
Strang

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(Hey, How About Treason?)

Toru Toba
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YEN ON
New York

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The Genius Prince’s Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?) 4
Toru Toba

Translation by Jessica Lange
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THE GIANT'S BACKBONE
Pass through Gairan to get to
the Kingdom of Natra
EARTHWORLD EMPIRE
SYSTIO STATE
SYSTIO
State Capital
MERLTARS
THE GIANT'S BACKBONE
KINGDOM OF CRVARIN

Chapter 1 | Hey, How About Relying On My Little Sister?

Future generations would be taught this incident had come upon them like an early summer.

They wouldn’t be far off the mark: The Kingdom of Natra had been seared by fanned flames long before the first signs of summer appeared.

The source was a major incident involving the Kingdoms of Natra and Cavarin.

It all began when Crown Prince Wein Salema Arbalest was invited to attend the Festival of the Spirit in Cavarin to celebrate the religion of Levetia, the church with the largest following in the west side of the continent. That happened to coincide with the Gathering of the Chosen, a ceremonial meeting held by the most influential figures of the faith.

It was the biggest event of the year, drawing eyes across the continent to the kingdom. But in the middle of it all, Ordalasse, the king of Cavarin and one of the Holy Elite, had been murdered in cold blood.

It was totally unprecedented for a ruler hosting an international conference to be assassinated in his own country. And as if that wasn’t a bolt from the blue, General Levert had the gall to accuse Wein of the crime after being granted temporary authority over the grieving nation.

The people of Natra were thunderstruck—and then burst into fits of rage! After all, Wein was beloved in their kingdom, known for standing out from all the rulers of the state’s long history for governing with benevolence and integrity. The accusation did not sit well with them.

Once Wein managed to escape the capital of Cavarin, he firmly stood his ground and insisted that the charge was false. By joining forces with the Remnant Army of Marden, former foe of Natra and most recently an enemy of Cavarin, they managed to push back General Levert’s forces.

And once Cavarin had been freed from Levert's rule, all parties had finally reconciled. With its territory returned to the people, Marden had declared vassalage to Natra.

Nothing could curb the tide of fervor in Natra after news of this historic victory spread like wildfire.

"His Highness is neck and neck with—No, he *surpasses* King Salema himself!"

"Indeed. With him as our ruler, we've basically been promised a golden era for the next hundred years!"

"That's absolutely correct! A million soldiers would pale in comparison to His Highness."

"To His Highness!"

"To the next hundred years!"

""""Cheers!""""

The two-hundred-year old Kingdom of Natra had finally expanded their territory, leaving its people with dancing feet and pounding hearts.

◆◇◆

Hence…

"Hooow in the world did this happen?!"

In his private office, the crown prince, praised by the masses as someone with more potential than their great founder, shrieked until his voice was raw—Wein Salema Arbalest.

"Impressive, really. *Everyone* is singing your praises," pointed out his aide, Ninym Ralei, with her striking white hair and red eyes. She sounded positively exhausted. "The 'founder reborn,'" she parodied. "The 'top strategist on the continent.' The 'wisest ruler in the world.' …You know, some people have really gotten ahead of themselves, calling you a god-king."

Ninym shrugged. *And you haven't even ascended to the throne*, her shoulders seemed to say.

"Your popularity really spiked after the war last year with Marden, but that was nothing compared to this," she added. "In all honesty, there's no way to stop it from blowing up out of proportion."

The people were so fired up, any attempt to douse their fervor would simply turn to steam.

Under normal circumstances, most heirs to the throne would be pleased to

have a high reputation.

"No! This wasn't in the plan! Why did *Marden* swear allegiance to *us*?!"

Unfortunately for him, Wein had a situation on his hands that was anything but normal.

After all, even though he'd managed to hoist the blame of the assassination on General Levert for "political reasons," Wein was the one who had murdered King Ordalasse. There had to be few among the Holy Elite who instinctively knew he was the true killer, though none could produce any solid proof.

Now that Wein had assassinated a member of the Holy Elite and made a mess of the Gathering of the Chosen, there was a high chance the organization would make trouble for him—and by extension, his homeland of Natra. But he had included the possibility in his calculations, and he had fully intended to revive Marden as an independent nation after driving out Cavarin forces with the Remnant Army. That way, Marden would serve as a buffer between his people and the rest of the West, protecting Natra from the mess they had instigated. In other words, the strategy was very…well…you know.

However, while Wein was busy pursuing his own agenda, Marden had moved forward on its own.

At the way things were going, it was obvious that Natra was going to take advantage of Marden. But without help from Natra, they wouldn't be able to rebuild their reclaimed land. Caught in this political quandary, Princess Zenovia decided as the representative of Marden that they would swear allegiance to Natra.

As Wein turned his attention to recovering from the war, Zenovia laid down the groundwork to gain the acceptance of Natra's finest and then brought this to Wein with aplomb.

"She got us. She really did."

"You're telling me!"

It was a surprise attack. The vassals of the kingdom were tickled pink about expanding their nation's territory in one fell swoop. There was no way Wein could voice his opposition.

"Damn you, Zeno. When we first met, she was all timid, but now she's showing how shrewd she can be…!"

"I wonder where she got that from."

"I can't possibly imagine. There must have been a real crook hanging around her."

"Take a look in the mirror."

“Whoa, get a load of that sexy hunk!”

“Weird. Must have been a fun house mirror.”

“…Not even that can rob him of his hotness!”

“You never know when to give it up.” Ninym flashed him a wry smile. “Joking aside, what’s the plan?”

“All we can do is ride this damn thing out,” Wein answered with a sigh. “As soon as Marden swore fealty, their people became ours. As a nation of immigrants, we’ll undermine our foundational values if we ignore their plight. Based on geography alone, Marden is going to take the brunt of the oncoming attacks. We’ve got no choice but to aid them.”

“Add that to our expenses.”

“We’ll also have to adjust the domestic balance of power. Ugh… What am I gonna do with Marden…?”

The Kingdom of Natra was a feudal state, a hodgepodge of lords. If their collective power as a nation could be quantified as one hundred points, the royal family of Arbalest held half of them. The remaining points belonged to the subordinate feudal lords within the nation. Though the royal family could order them to act in certain ways, the Arbalests did not wield that power themselves. To utilize the kingdom’s full power, they needed to be on good terms with the other lords.

If any single lord was in control of ten points, that would amount to a full tenth of the nation’s collective power and be equivalent to a fifth of the Arbalests’. That would be enough to secure their place as high nobility, meaning even the royal family couldn’t afford to slight them.

Naturally, the royals would want to carefully orchestrate marriages between the noble families. The unthinkable would happen if a chance union gave birth to a lord who could rival the king. From the perspective of the royal family, the nobility were most convenient when they remained as harmless as bleating sheep.

Wein felt no differently. In order to keep the nobility in their place, he had vigilantly maintained an equilibrium between him and his nobles.

Then Marden came along. They were originally a feudal nation of a comparable size. Natra had helped them win back the land they had lost to Cavarin, which led Marden to swear fealty to Wein’s kingdom.

The issue here was that Marden had power. A lot of it.

Of course, it wasn’t as though their stolen land had come back to them in one piece. In the peace treaty with Cavarin, Marden had lost a chunk of its territory,

while some other regions had become part of Natra. But even then, they had thirty points of power in this analogy, which meant they could compete directly with the Arbalest family. For Wein, it was as though a boar had bolted through the sheep pen that contained his meticulously groomed lords.

"If we continue to treat Marden as a foreign entity, they'll get totally crushed, which is exactly what they want to avoid. Hence their plan to immediately join our side," Wein explained.

The quick and easy way to become part of the nation would be to marry into the royal family or high nobility. Blood relations were paramount in this society.

"But even if they had all the power in the world, I imagine the old nobility will refuse to allow marriage between the royal family and new vassals who were outsiders until very recently," Ninym brought up.

And Natra was one of the oldest nations on the continent. There were quite a few noble families who were proud of supporting the enduring kingdom for much of its life. Even though these individual households posed less threat than Marden, their collective opposition would be hard to ignore.

"And as a member of the royal family, I want to appease all parties."

He was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. This was the issue at hand.

"If Princess Zenovia were a boy, you could have considered marrying off Princess Falanya. But they're both girls, which makes this impossible," Ninym added.

"Maybe she *is* a boy," Wein suggested hopefully.

"Why don't you ask her next time? I bet you'll get a faceful."

Nix that. That would definitely hurt, Wein thought.

"Let's put the matter on hold for now. We can think about it again after we've talked it over with Zeno and the nobles."

"Understood," Ninym responded. "Next, we need to decide what to do with the territories of the lords who led the rebellion. And then prepare our defenses against foreign incursion. Plus, we need to incorporate the culture, customs, and way of life that the people of Marden have brought with them, now that they're part of us. And then we'll need to smooth things over between the army and General Hagal, since he was just following our orders. Et cetera, et cetera. What do you want to start with?"

"First, let me cry from overwork."

"Hmm, tears of joy? As your vassal, I'm honored. And to continue…"

"You mean there's more?!" Wein shrieked.

As prince regent, Wein already had an extremely packed schedule from the

get-go, but after the size of the realm grew even larger, his work literally never ended. A day off existed only in the realm of fantasy.

"…Hey, what's this?"

Ninym had handed him a sealed letter, not a stack of documents.

"An invitation. To a party."

"During the busiest time of my life? From who?" Wein demanded, ripping open the letter.

His eyes widened when he read its contents.

Across from him, Ninym grinned sweetly.

"—From Her Highness, Princess Lowellmina."

◆◇◆

The state of Systio was one of the provinces in the Earthworld Empire, nestled in the center of the continent. Its location made it an ideal point to circulate goods, though it was most famous for the city of Mealtars.

The continent of Varno was split into east and west sections by the Giant's Backbone. There were highways in the north, south, and central regions that allowed passage between the two sides. Mealtars was positioned on that central artery.

It was a crucial location from a military and commercial standpoint. Mealtars was lauded as an especially good town for business, and the town lived up to this reputation.

This soiree was going to be held in that very city.

"…So this is the drink that's been all the rage in Mealtars," observed the second-born princess of the Earthworld Empire, Lowellmina.

Her eyes followed the liquid as it was poured into the cup. She frowned.

"Yes. Made from beans harvested in the southwestern region of the continent. The beans are roasted and then their essence extracted," replied an older man sitting across from her.

Lowellmina glanced at him and then back at the cup of black water, trying to gather the courage to drink it.

She took a sip.

"…It's bitter."

"Which is what makes the people come back for more." The man shrugged when he saw her scrunch her nose. "But if it's too much for your palate, you

mustn’t force yourself to finish it.”

“I don’t mind. I’m finally in Mealtars. I want to immerse myself in another culture,” Lowellmina explained, taking another sip. If the masses thought *this* was good, you could really develop a palate for anything. “That aside, Mayor Cosimo, it seems you’ve heard back from a great number of our invitees.”

“Yes. With the date approaching, the important attendees have already arrived in the city. This is proof the Empire still has clout,” replied the man, Cosimo, running his fingers through his beard.

As Lowellmina had mentioned, he was the mayor of Mealtars.

“And our three guests of honor?” she asked.

“Patiently waiting for the event without any signs of disagreement. You were right, Your Highness. It was wise to place them in separate guesthouses.”

“My biggest concern was that they would ruin everything before the party. If giving them space will lessen the chances of that, I’ll do whatever it takes to make it happen.” Lowellmina faintly smiled. “It looks like we can safely commence…our summit with all the Imperial children.”

The Summit of the Imperial Children. It necessitated the gathering of the three Imperial princes and Lowellmina, who all held the right to inherit the throne of the Earthworld Empire. This discussion to sort out their inheritance would essentially decide the future of the Empire in its entirety.

“However, Your Highness, we’ve only finished meeting the prerequisites for this auspicious meeting. If we cannot resolve matters in an amicable way, we will not be able to quell chaos in the Empire.”

“I know. But this is not something I can do by myself.”

The guests of honor were the three Imperial princes. If their torrent of thoughts didn’t all converge, the meeting would end in a disaster. Lowellmina couldn’t guarantee the likelihood of them coming to an agreement with any confidence.

“Nonsense,” Cosimo reassured, mistaking her reply as a sign of anxiety. “You were the one who helped the Empire avoid civil war and persuaded the Imperial princes to participate in this meeting. As a vassal of the Empire, I urge you to wield that power once more and bring a peaceful resolution to the Summit of the Imperial Children.”

His voice dripped with sorrow, as if speaking for all the people of the Empire.

However, Lowellmina had noticed something else: While he presented himself as a loyal subject, there was an unmistakably sharp glint in his eyes.

Of course. This was Mealtars. A merchant city. A battlefield where having one more copper coin than an opponent was a real advantage, where each new day meant more wheeling and dealing. And this was the man who was in charge of this city, which meant he was bound to be a challenge.

“But of course. For the Empire and its citizens, I intend to try my hardest,” Lowellmina mustered a harmless reply with a smile.

If she made a careless remark here, it might come back to bite her later.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door. It was a woman—Fyshe Blundell, Lowellmina’s aide.

“Pardon me. Princess Lowellmina, a delegation has just arrived from Natra.”

“I heard they might be late, but they’re right on time. Where are they now?”

“At the manor that has been prepared for them. They said they will come here to greet you after they have changed into more formal wear.”

There were other guests invited to the summit besides the Imperial princes. The Natra delegation was one of them.

“Hmm. The rumored prince has made an appearance, too, huh.” This piqued Cosimo’s attention.

After trouncing Marden the previous year, Natra had followed that up with a victory in the recent war against Cavarin, steadily advancing their interests on multiple fronts. As a merchant who was always on the lookout for an opportunity, Cosimo wanted to know more about this key figure who hailed from the country making such historic progress.

“I think I remember you were discussing a potential marriage with the crown prince.”

“Yes. But that has been shelved with this internal mess.”

“In that case, this meeting might just end with a celebration for deciding on the next emperor and your engagement.”

“That would please me.”

Lowellmina and Cosimo exchanged small smiles before the mayor stood up.

“Well then, I hope you will pardon me for the day. I wish to greet the prince if the opportunity arises. Please introduce me when the time comes.”

“Yes, of course.”

Cosimo bowed and left the room.

Lowellmina waited until he was far away before draining the rest of her cup.

“Hffff—” She let out an exhausted sigh.

“Excellent work, Princess Lowellmina.”

“I’m beat. I really need to keep my guard up around that mayor.” Lowellmina

collapsed on the desk.

Fyshe continued speaking beside her. “Lord Cosimo has been the mayor for many years. And as a merchant, he will naturally be enthusiastic about any potential leads for business.”

“Which is exactly why he’s been very helpful. He’s done us a big favor, getting this meeting together,” Lowellmina admitted. “Doesn’t make him any less of a pain,” she grumbled under her breath when she heard something outside.

“It seems that our guests from Natra have arrived,” Fyshe observed, looking out the window.

Lowellmina jumped to her feet. “I should go out to meet them.”

“Are you sure that is the right move? If you personally greet them, there may be accusations that you show too much favoritism toward their small country.”

“But we were the ones who extended the invitation, and they’re important visitors from an ally nation. If we do not welcome them, we will signal that we fail to observe proper manners in the Empire. And if I personally greet them, I can cement our close relationship. Am I wrong?”

“My apologies. It took me too long to fully understand your foresight.” Fyshe nodded formally.

Lowellmina smiled. “Well, I admit the primary reason is to gaze upon Wein’s unhappy face.”

“……”

“Hee-hee. Oh, I can’t wait. Everyone will think I have ties with Natra as long as he comes to me. But as an invitee, there’s no way for him to *not* greet me. I can practically see Wein’s face screw up in pain.”

“If you can already envision it in your head, perhaps there is no reason to go out of your way to meet him.”

“I’m starting to forget all the details of his face, and I could use a refresher.”

“I see.”

Fyshe had recently begun to understand her mistress’s true nature. She offered no more. If Fyshe averted her eyes from all the smaller details, Lowellmina was a wonderful master.

“Shall we?”

Lowellmina and Fyshe left the room and headed for the foyer. They arrived just as the delegation of Natra was filing in.

“Thank you for making the long journey to Mealtars,” Lowellmina greeted as she approached. “From all of the Earthworld Empire, I wish to welcome—”

That was when Lowellmina's eyes registered a certain figure at the center of the group.

"…Each? One? Of? You?" Lowellmina managed to finish.

After all, Wein was not the one standing before her. It was a young girl about two heads shorter.

"I would like to extend my gratitude to you for the invitation."

Lowellmina blinked back in shock as the young girl bowed her head.

"My name is Falanya Elk Arbalest. I have come to greet Your Highness in the stead of my older brother, Wein."

Future historians would readily admit the wit of Prince Wein Salema Arbalest, even if they were his toughest critics in the world.

But at this moment in time, his reputation was still up in the air. The West would claim the Holy Elite possessed the greatest minds on the continent, the East would turn toward the Imperial children, and the South would raise its notable candidates.

But in the North, there was another slumbering beast whose name would be known by all future historians.

Falanya Elk Arbalest.

Until this moment, she had been known only as Wein's younger sister. But that would all change as she stepped to the forefront of history.

This was the event that would start it all: the Summit of the Imperial Children.

"—We need to talk about the meeting between the Imperial children."

Rewind back to a meeting room in the palace of Natra lined with only the most important vassals. They were looking at one thing: Crown Prince Wein sitting at the head of the table.

"As I believe you've already heard, the children of the Imperial family will be gathering in the city of Mealtars, located in the center of the continent. On paper, our invitation is for another ceremony hosted in the city at the same time to entertain the most influential players in all the land, including Natra."

Wein didn't even pause for a second. "Make no mistake. This meeting is incredibly important. It would be the most proper if I were the one to attend. Unfortunately, however, we are in the middle of recovering from war. Which is why I'm bringing it to you. Let me hear your input about whether I should attend."

Wein took a sweeping look at his vassals, asking each one of them for input.

They started to offer their opinions.

"As you said, Prince Wein, we are in the middle of a transitionary period as a nation. We must tread carefully. Things might take a turn for the worse if you left the kingdom right now, Your Highness."

"Please. It's not just the Imperial children who will be in attendance. The greatest minds of each nation will be present, too. If the next emperor is chosen at this meeting, it would reflect badly on us as an allied kingdom if we fail to send a proper representative."

"How do we know they'll actually assign someone to the throne? Is it worth neglecting your country for a mere hypothetical?"

"Then we can support the nation in His Highness's absence. Or is there nothing useful in that skull of yours?"

“What was that?!”

“Quiet, please. You are standing before royalty.”

The meeting room filled with varying opinions flying left and right. Wein listened for a nugget of wisdom within the fighting words.

Looks about fifty-fifty.

If this had happened a year prior, they most likely would have insisted he attend. However, in a short amount of time, the Empire had declined in power, and Natra had actually *gained* territory. Things were looking up. This had made the vassals a little too overconfident.

—At this rate, they’ll decide I should sit it out! Wein thought gleefully.

He never had any intention of going. There were a number of reasons for this, including that he was simply too busy, especially since the war with Cavarin had led to the expansion of the kingdom’s territory. Nothing like it had ever occurred within living memory, which meant they currently had no system in place to handle it.

That was why there were reports of confusion and disorder in the newly gained territory. It was like mashing together gears that didn’t fit. Wein had his hands full.

Another reason was Lowellmina. All of the surrounding nations believed Natra sided with her faction, because he had a hand in suppressing the civil insurrection in Earthworld.

Naturally, Wein had no plans on joining her side. However, if he accepted the invitation, he knew for a doggone *fact* that Lowellmina would use every method at her disposal to get him to aid her cause.

And there’s absolutely no way I’m letting that happen! Backing her would be more trouble than it’s worth!

That said, a chance to meet with the Imperial princes would be huge. Wein wanted to talk to them if he could. But if he accepted the invite, he would have to side with Lowellmina, which meant instantly making enemies of the three princes. And that wouldn’t be good at all.

Well, it’s not like they’ll decide on the emperor anyway.

The summit was an opportunity to discuss who would be the next emperor. But Wein could tell this event was mostly a performance.

The internal strife had damaged the standing of the Empire, and the people were anxious about the lack of a new emperor. This meeting was supposed to pacify them, let the people know the Imperial family wanted to decide who would inherit the throne with words instead of violence. This was also meant to

show the Empire still had the clout to assemble all the major powers in one place.

If the Imperial throne was to remain empty, Wein could atone for declining the invitation using diplomatic strategies at a later time. For all these reasons, Wein had ultimately decided to turn down the request.

Heh. I can practically see the look on Lowa's face when she gets the news that I'm not coming.

As Wein continued to think about the most pointless things, he suddenly realized a pair of eyes were on him. They belonged to a young girl who was sitting a short distance from him—his younger sister, Falanya.

Wein wasn't the only one from the royal family in attendance, as he was joined by the crown princess.

Hmm? What's up?

She was staring at him as if she wanted to say something but found it hard to actually give voice to the idea. Wein considered the possibilities before it finally hit him.

Oh, I bet she's thinking I'll have time to play with her if I turn down this invitation.

Now that he thought about it, he realized Falanya had recently found a reason to follow Wein around. She must have gotten lonely because she hadn't been winning his attention. Though he had been busy, Wein was disappointed in himself as an older brother for not realizing this sooner.

Rest easy, Falanya. I'll find a way to make time for you.

Maybe they could enjoy a dance or some poetry together. They could also go for a long ride on horseback.

Wein turned to his younger sister and smiled.

In recent days, Falanya Elk Arbalest had one fear: There was nothing she could do to help out.

The source of her worries was Wein, who was positively overworked.

Ever since he'd assumed the role of prince regent, he had been burdened with a great number of duties. It wasn't just the usual work involved to keep the nation running. He had to deal with foreign diplomacy and orchestrate wars and perform a whole slew of other miscellaneous tasks.

Hoping to lessen his burden, Falanya had earnestly applied herself to studying politics and attended meetings in his stead. These tasks had given her a

modest amount of confidence.

But even that had been squashed when their borders grew and Wein's workload exponentially increased.

I can't even handle 10 percent of his job… I have to find something that I can *do…!*

With her strong sense of duty driving her, Falanya had opted to follow Wein around. She kept out of his way, searching for something she could do in his place.

I wonder if I can attend the summit for Wein…

She *was* the crown princess of Natra. That gave her the right to attend. It would also allow Wein to focus on the kingdom's internal politics while she handled the external stuff. This arrangement would be mutually beneficial.

But…

It was an armchair theory. Never mind talking to important foreign officials, Falanya had never even been outside Natra. Could she be trusted as a diplomat?

What does Wein think…?

Falanya glanced over at him. He was her big brother. He had to know what she was thinking. All she wanted was for him to say she should go in his place. Then she could nod without hesitation.

Wein must have noticed her gaze, because his eyes shot toward hers.

——*gh!* Falanya was floored.

Her brother's normally kind and gentle eyes had narrowed in focus as he appraised her. Like a parent waiting for their child to stand for the first time. It was both affectionate and solemn.

I'm so weak, Falanya scolded herself.

By wishing he would support her decision, she had practically hoisted the responsibility of the choice onto Wein. That would never do in meetings with foreign dignitaries.

Falanya's mind raced. *Wein is waiting…for me to think and act for myself!*

Wein stifled a yawn. *Crap, I almost fell asleep.*

Ninym stood dutifully behind him. *I feel there's been a grave misunderstanding…*

As the lords continued to shout at one another, Falanya stood up resolutely.

"—I shall attend the summit in Wein's stead."

Her declaration took the vassals by surprise. Wein's eyeballs practically shriveled up and plopped out of his skull. Ninym stared up at the ceiling.

This moment cemented Falanya's debut on the diplomatic stage.

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I never imagined Princess Falanya would be the one to attend… Lowellmina's brain churned as she looked at Falanya sitting across from her.

After Wein's younger sister finished up the formalities, Lowellmina had suggested they chat over tea. Things had been okay until then—but this conversation was going absolutely nowhere.

"How has your time in Mealtars been? Were you surprised by how different the weather is from Natra?"

"Indeed."

"I highly recommend visiting our markets to see the goods we import from all across the continent."

"If the opportunity arises."

"……"

That was the gist of it.

There were a few reasons to account for this behavior. Falanya was nervous. It was hard to find a topic of mutual interest. But it was mainly because Falanya had all her defenses up against Lowellmina.

I did see a glimpse of this when I met her before. But…

It wasn't the first time Lowellmina had met Falanya. They had spoken on occasion when the Imperial princess had been in Natra, though their exchanges had been limited to a brief word or two. But that was because Falanya had handled domestic affairs of state while Lowellmina and Wein were busy leading the war effort.

That contributed to the mystery. Why was she being so cautious? She had no reason to like or dislike Lowellmina.

If anything, Wein or Ninym might have said something to her.

Lowellmina glanced behind Falanya, straight at her attendant who was standing up. It was Wein's aide, Ninym. Under his orders, she had accompanied Falanya as her temporary assistant.

Lowellmina and Ninym were childhood friends. But at this moment, it seemed Ninym wouldn't act in that way, even if Lowellmina were to affectionately look her way.

So she won't mediate this discussion with Princess Falanya, huh. Well, this is a royal mess…

It had to be Wein's doing. It wouldn't shock her if he had told Falanya a

whole tangle of lies and warned her to stay on her guard. Maybe something along the lines of:

You won't find anyone with a worse personality on this entire continent than her.

She's the type to stab you while wearing a huge grin.

You know, I bet she wears a push-up bra.

All he did was meddle in her affairs. Lowellmina hoped to avoid souring her relationship with the representative of the kingdom that she wanted to join her faction.

We can start by talking about Wein to loosen her up.

Clearly, Falanya had a soft spot for Wein.

With the intention to use him to open up their conversation, Lowellmina began to speak.

As it turned out, Lowellmina's assumptions were largely correct.

Once she had been chosen to act as the representative of Natra, Falanya immediately began poring over anything that could be even remotely pertinent to the meeting, which obviously included information on Lowellmina. Falanya thought back on their little lesson.

"Let's start with the Imperial princess." Wein turned toward Falanya, who was perched on a chair in the meeting room. "After she managed to stop the revolt in the Empire, enough citizens flocked to her side to be recognized as their own faction."

He went on. "The princess could have led them and declared her claim to the throne—"

"But she didn't, did she?" Falanya asked.

Wein nodded.

Even though Lowellmina had spoken to Wein and Ninym about taking the throne, she hadn't made a formal announcement that she was thinking about exercising her right. Obviously, it wasn't because of a change of heart. The real answer was shockingly logical.

"The people have sided with the princess only because they're tired of the fighting that's going on between the three princes. It's not because they stand behind her vision or particularly want to see her on the throne. I think she knows that if she lets the public know that she's vying for the position, they'll shut her down and accuse her of trying to prolong the infighting. In essence, she's made

her faction a patriotic one.”

The main concern of this group was the future of the Empire. Lowellmina had gathered these Empire-loving people under her banner by hiding her own ambitions. Their aim was exceedingly simple. They needed to avoid a falling-out between the princes, as that would cause the civil conflict to surge up again and fracture the Empire. They had gone around to all the lords, convincing them to come together to decide on the next emperor.

“Compared to the princes, her faction has negligible military strength. But she’s using this to her advantage, positioning herself as the one who cares only about the future of the Empire. If anyone tries to forcibly silence her, they’ll become a public enemy.”

Lowellmina was correct. The populace thought the matter should be diplomatically resolved, but the three princes were unable to do that. After all, each was convinced they would be the best emperor.

And she alone had managed to find a logical approach. The princes didn’t have the grounds to claim she was wrong, and they couldn’t employ violence either, lest it become cause for censure. They were in a gridlock.

Lowellmina had single-handedly undermined the princes’ authority, while her own reputation skyrocketed. She was practically entering the bonus round with her high approval rating.

“…She’s the worst.”

“You’re telling me,” Wein said, nodding at her observation.

Says you! Lowellmina would have screeched if she’d been in the room.

“When the princes finally hit rock bottom, that will ignite something in the loyalists, and she can waltz in, promoting herself as the replacement. I’m guessing that’s her long-term plan.”

“Does that mean this summit is intended to make the princes look bad?”

“I think that’s one thing she’s after. Well, I doubt it’s the whole story. In any case, Falanya, be careful of Lowellmina. She’s the type to stab you while wearing a huge grin—”

—That had concluded their little discussion before her departure.

According to Wein, Princess Lowellmina is an overambitious woman vying for the throne…

That was what her beloved brother had told her. Falanya had no reason to doubt him. Plus, she had two other reasons for being especially weary of Lowellmina.

There’s no way I’ll let her marry Wein!

That was one.

Talk of marriage had come up between Wein and Lowellmina. Circumstances at the time had prevented any concrete decisions, but that didn’t mean the idea was completely off the table. There was a possibility she would become Wein’s wife one day.

I won’t ever let that happen! Wein belongs with Ninym!

Wein was an older brother worthy of the highest respect. And Falanya knew the only one who deserved to stand by his side was Ninym. She was like an older sister to Falanya, not to mention that anyone could see there was a deep bond between Wein and his aide. Was there room for others to come between them? Not a chance.

Basically, Falanya shipped Wein with Ninym. A romance with Lowellmina would never be canon. Given the latest developments, some people were hoping Wein and Zenovia might get together, but Falanya was completely devoted to backing Wein and Ninym as the one true pairing!

“Though I feel fortunate to take this opportunity to see you, Princess Falanya, it is unfortunate that Prince Wein will not be joining us. It would have been marvelous to see the two of you side by side.”

“My brother is a very busy man.”

“I heard Natra took control of Marden after the war. Your brother is quite active on many fronts. You must be very proud, Princess Falanya.”

“Yes…”

“Come to think of it, did you know we were classmates when Prince Wein was studying abroad? Even at our military academy, he was incredibly—”

Lowellmina failed to notice Falanya’s lackluster reaction, continuing to blab about Wein. Falanya had realized her true aim: By praising Wein, she was trying to whittle at the barrier between them.

Heh. How silly. You thought that would make me lower my guard?

Hearing Wein receive praise made Falanya as happy as though she was being complimented herself. But everyone had been praising Wein lately. And she’d grown tired of hearing empty flattery.

I’m not being cautious only because of Wein’s warning and my own personal concerns.

The third reason was that she had a duty to fulfill.

This was Falanya’s first foray into diplomacy, and it would be unrealistic to expect anything significant to come out of it. Falanya was well aware that if she

tried to negotiate with the Imperial princes or any other important figures, they would likely manipulate her into promising something strange.

That was why Wein had strictly ordered her to simply sit in attendance and then come straight home. Satisfying that bare minimum was enough diplomacy for the time being. The bar had been set very low.

When she had arrived in Mealtars, her duty was essentially already halfway done. After that, all she had to do was remain quiet until the meeting came to a safe conclusion. There was no need to make friends with Lowellmina. This explained why Ninym had been wordlessly overseeing the course of events.

I heard the princess wanted to be on good terms with Natra, but Wein saw through her act. Poor princess. Falanya mentally snorted.

You'll regret looking down on me as the type of easy girl who will be swayed at the mention of Wein's name…!

Ten minutes later.

"And then Prince Wein translated the Church's hieroglyphic ledger and used that to prove the corrupt nature of the priests. He scattered the evidence around town to threaten them."

"Goodness gracious. Did he really go that far?"

"Absolutely. But while we were trying to negotiate with them, our classmate Glen slashed at a priest out of righteous indignation. There are so many twists and turns to this story and—"

Lowellmina was speaking of her school days animatedly while Falanya hung on to every word.

—She has a good eye for character!

Falanya had already surrendered.

Her earlier vigilance was nowhere to be found. She was fully receptive to anything Lowellmina had to say.

Lowellmina's eloquence was to blame. She was a great conversationalist and spoke with an undeniable charm. Plus, Falanya knew little of Wein's time in school. It was understandable why she soon became engrossed with those stories.

Lowellmina painted Wein as an especially impressive figure. He was daring and fearless, calm and collected. But even he messed up on occasion and could be mischievous at times.

Falanya knew this humanizing portrayal of him to be accurate.

In recent days, it seemed everyone in Natra had something good to say about

her brother. This delighted Falanya, but there was something she'd always wanted to say.

—You're all late to the party! And you've barely scratched the surface!

Falanya had known Wein was totally amazing since she was very little. But it seemed the public was only just beginning to discover this for themselves. They were behind the times! That was what she had been trying to hold back.

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As if that wasn't bad enough, Wein had only been praised for his many accomplishments, which was totally superficial.

They've gotten it so wrong! That's not what makes Wein great!

After all, those were nothing more than a matter of chance. There would inevitably be times when he failed, even when he did everything right, when fate and circumstance would conspire against him.

But did failure make her brother any less amazing? Obviously not.

He took up the position of prince regent at a young age and bore the responsibility of national politics. For years, he'd endured the pressure and expectations of those around him. There was no way he *wouldn't* be amazing.

She knew his true greatness came from his ability to smile, even on the most soul crushing of days.

And that was exactly how Lowellmina spoke of him.

"He's constantly surprised me with his thoughts and actions. It's like he goes above and beyond people's expectations."

Uh-huh.

"Well, sometimes that gets him into predicaments."

I know!

"But he still manages to smile, even in the most unpleasant situations. He's a strong person. That must be his true power."

I totally agree!

There was no way Falanya could refuse her. It was obvious she would get along with this Lowellmina girl who was also a fan of her brother.

Well, I still won't accept the marriage.

Those were two separate things.

Falanya gently set that issue aside in her heart.

"Come to think of it," Lowellmina started, "I'd love to hear about Wein before he came to the academy. I hear he has been wise since his early days."

"When he was younger?" Falanya dug through her memories. "My brother never changes. Wein has been kind and dependable for as long as I can remember. I'm always proud of him. Suffice to say, he was a bookworm when we were children, though he's too busy now to indulge."

Everyone in Natra praised Wein's abilities as natural talent, but the truth was that much of his achievements were only possible because of the vast amount of books he had consumed.

As one of the longest standing nations on the continent, Natra had archived many documents that dealt with governance: the successes and failures of

industries—including details on necessary budgets, timetables, and staff—records of public opinion, plans that went smoothly, plans that led to the unimaginable, et cetera. Those documents were their predecessors' blueprints, and they played a huge part in shaping Wein.

"He also studied the sword, debated with the vassals, researched farming methods…"

"I see. As extraordinary as the rumors say."

"Yes, but—" Falanya realized she had spoken without thinking and desperately held the words back.

"Is something the matter?"

"…It is nothing." Falanya coughed and zipped up her lips.

Naturally, Lowellmina noticed this. Once she confirmed Falanya had almost made a verbal gaffe, the princess raced to think of a way to draw it out.

"—Please excuse me for interrupting your conversation." Ninym's voice cut in as if trying to cut her off. "I'm afraid the sun will be setting shortly. We must prepare for the ceremony, and I believe it would be best that you return to your manor."

"Ah…you're right. It appears we have been talking for quite some time," Falanya said with surprise as she peered out the window.

Time had flown by during the tea party that she had been initially wary of.

Ninym and Lowellmina threw daggers at each other as Falanya continued to gaze outside. A few seconds later, Lowellmina sighed, signaling her defeat.

"I am reluctant to part with you, but it appears to be time. Still, this conversation has only further confirmed that Natra is an irreplaceable ally to the Empire." Lowellmina smiled and stretched out her hand.

"For the friendship between our nations, I certainly hope we can chat again sometime, Princess Falanya."

"Of course, Princess Lowellmina." Falanya reached out, and the two shook hands firmly.

Ninym watched over them closely.

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"Whew——Am I beat."

Falanya flopped down on the bed as soon as they returned to their room in the manor.

"You did a fine job today, Princess Falanya. Though this is bordering on

unladylike.”

Falanya rolled around on the bed. “It’s okay. You’re the only one watching, Ninym.”

“I’m afraid that is not the case. Right, Nanaki?”

When Ninym called out, a boy with white hair seeped out from the shadows.

Nanaki Ralei. Falanya’s guard and aide.

“You called? …Whoa.” With one hand, he caught the pillow that came whizzing toward him.

He traced the projectile’s path back to its source and caught sight of Falanya, bright red, fixing the hem of her outfit.

“Ugh! Get out, Nanaki!”

“……” Nanaki handed Ninym the pillow, thinking to himself that this was awfully unfair, considering he’d only come out because he was called.

“Urgh… Sometimes I forget Nanaki is right there.”

“It’s proof he is an excellent guard. Though I should caution him about a few things as an aide.” Ninym flashed a dry smile as she passed the pillow back to Falanya.

The princess hugged it. “…Hey, Ninym, did the conversation between me and Princess Lowellmina go all right?”

“Of course. I was only there just in case, but as a vassal, I admired the way you held your head high even before Princess Lowellmina.”

“But I got really sucked into the conversation… Didn’t Wein say I should keep my distance from her?”

“Yes. Princess Lowellmina wishes for Natra to join her cause. But it would be more prudent as a kingdom to keep a safe distance from the struggle for the throne. That said, the only important thing now is for you to attend the ceremony and safely return home. To that end, Prince Wein has said he does not mind even if we become a little sidetracked in the process.”

“That’s true, but…”

If it was possible, Falanya wanted Wein to praise her for performing admirably. She was his little sister, after all.

Ninym understood. “Of course, I think it is wonderful that you’re striving to do your best, and I will do whatever I can to support you. But we’re speaking of Prince Wein. He will be happy that he could depend on you, even if there are some setbacks.”

“…Do you really think so?”

“I do.” Ninym nodded with confidence.

Falanya showed her a shy smile. “Hee-hee. Okay. I’ll let Wein indulge me then.”

“That’s for the best.” Ninym grinned back. “It’s growing late. Will you be retiring to bed soon?”

“Not yet. I’d like to stay up awhile. Ninym, will you stay here and chat?”

“Understood. I can bring us something to drink.”

“Thank you.”

Ninym bowed and silently slipped out of the room.

Falanya squeezed her pillow and laid down on the bed. “I know I just said that, but I really want to bring Wein some good news.”

To do that, she had to stand strong, even at her very first foreign ceremony. She couldn’t fall for all the sweet talk like she had today.

“…Oh right…”

Falanya had remembered something from the tea party.

She was so thankful that Ninym had jumped in before she had accidentally let something slip to Lowellmina.

It wasn’t anything that ought to be said in front of a foreign dignitary.

“I can’t tell her I used to be scared of my brother because he barely seemed human…” she whispered to herself.

No one was there to hear her confession as the faint words faded into the night in Mealtars.

The ceremony that would soon prove that this was a city of clashing ideas drew ever closer.

Chapter 3 | Three Imperial Princes

"—Allow me to explain again."

A few days had passed since their tea party with Lowellmina. The carriage swayed as it passed through the town. Ninym was addressing Falanya, who sat across from her.

"You will be attending the ceremony to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Mealtars uniting with the Empire."

"Not for the summit of the Imperial family."

Ninym nodded. "That is a gathering exclusive to them. Outsiders cannot participate or observe. Meaning there's no real reason for everyone to be here. But the princes wished to gather the land's most influential people in the same place. This ceremony serves as the pretext to summon everyone."

Which the important guests knew. They had come for other reasons: to form ties with the Imperial princes, to appraise their competition, to satisfy their curiosity, et cetera.

"The ceremony consists of a simple greeting and congratulatory address. The main event is the dinner party for the guests of honor and invitees. There, we will try to greet the stars of the night: the eldest prince, Demetrio; the middle prince, Bardloche; and the youngest prince, Manfred. As for their appearance and expected ideals…"

"It's all right. I remember what Wein told me," Falanya said with a brave nod.

Her nerves were written all over her face.

Ninym lightly admonished her. "It's only a greeting. No need to be so nervous."

"…I know, but I can't help myself." The princess pouted. "If I could, I'd like to stop my hands from shaking, too. But then I start wondering if I can pull this

whole thing off, and I…”

It wasn’t surprising, considering she was about to embark on the first significant venture in her life. However, Ninym could not let the girl collapse under the pressure.

“In that case, what if you pretended to be Prince Wein?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you think he would act in this scenario?”

“Hmm…” Falanya dug up all her memories of observing Wein from behind the scenes.

Her brother was kind and dependable. Even when he was totally cornered, she’d never seen him tremble in fear like she did. His back was always the straightest whenever the situations got more difficult. He would hold his head high, stick out his chest, and smile.

“……” Falanya pushed the corners of her mouth up with her fingers. “… What do you think? Am I smiling like Wein?”

“It’s looking a little strained.”

“…I’ll need to practice.”

“It seems your hands have stopped shaking.”

Falanya checked to see if it was true. There was still tension in her core, but her fingers were no longer trembling.

“Ninym, I’ll do my best and make sure I see this through.”

“I am certain you will,” Ninym said respectfully. “Neither I nor Prince Wein have any doubt that you will fulfill your role.”

The carriage came to a slow halt. They could see a large building outside the window. It was the State Guesthouse, a landmark in Mealtars. People were already gathering inside. As Falanya looked on in awe at the foreign structure, servants of the city opened the carriage door.

“Shall we, Your Highness?” Ninym prompted.

Falanya took a deep breath and firmly nodded.

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From the moment they stepped foot inside the venue, it was like they had entered another world.

Every available surface of the walls was meticulously decorated with intricate pieces. The chandelier almost looked like a jewel suspended from the ceiling, making all wonder in awe over its craftsmanship. It bathed the room in a

soft light, giving the polished floors an indescribable gleam.

It was a banquet. The tables were covered with crisp cloths and set with floral centerpieces. They must have been imported. Their sweet nectar tickled the guests' noses, filling the hall with the unfamiliar scent.

Even the attendees were suitably elegant for the occasion, though that was expected.

After all, this summit was intimately connected to the future of both the Empire and the surrounding nations. Should they trust the Empire or abandon it? Who would make a good ally? Who might become a threat? Those in attendance were here to sort this out.

"Do not feel daunted, Your Highness," whispered Ninym from behind.

"Yes, I know." Falanya took a step forward.

Smile, Falanya. Think of Wein.

Two steps. Then three. She straightened her back and wore her best smile.

The people around her began to whisper.

"What a lovely lady. Where is she from?"

"I don't think I've seen her before. But she appears well-mannered."

"Accompanied by a Flahm attendant. A rarity."

"Speaking of the Flahm, I hear they occupy vital posts that serve the royal family of Natra."

"Then she must be—"

"Princess Falanya." A pair of shoes clinked before her. "I haven't seen you since our tea party. How have you been?"

It was the princess of the Earthworld Empire, Lowellmina.

The crowd really started to buzz. Of course. She was one of the guests of honor. All present were carefully watching her every move. And any blunder here would be unforgivable.

"—Yes, of course. Embarrassingly enough, I have a little too much energy," Falanya replied after taking a deep breath.

Lowellmina smiled. "I see. I was worried for your health when I heard it was your first visit to a foreign nation. But I see that my concerns were all for naught."

"I am grateful for your concern. My time in the Empire has been quite agreeable so far."

Falanya had managed to come up with this inoffensive reply when a third voice cut in.

"—As a citizen of Mealtars, I could receive no greater honor."

It was a middle-aged man. He looked unfamiliar.

As Falanya considered who he might be, Lowellmina introduced him. “This is the mayor of Mealtars, Cosimo.”

He bowed. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess Falanya.”

Falanya curtsied in return. “It is wonderful to meet you, Mayor Cosimo. Thank you for inviting me to this ceremony.”

“As an ally of the Earthworld Empire, it is only natural that you receive an invitation. It is unfortunate that we are unable to meet the rumored crown prince, but—” He offered a gentle smile. “I never thought his stand-in would be so lovely. I must instruct my subordinates to offer a more cordial welcome.”

“My. You flatter me. As to be expected of the mayor of a merchant city.”

“No, not at all. In my youth, I wasn’t the best at my job. After all, I lacked the most essential skill for any merchant: the ability to lie to the customer.” Cosimo shrugged in jest, making Falanya and Lowellmina chuckle.

“Do not let him fool you, Princess Falanya. You know how they say, study a religion to know God, and study under the Imperial military to fight? Well, you should study under Cosimo to get rich.”

“And for those inquiring young ones, I tell them: Make honest deals.”

“Hee-hee. If that were true, your ledger would only have a cover, Mayor Cosimo.”

“It’s the strangest thing. If I even take my eyes off it for a second, all the pages in my ledger go missing. Fairies must be playing a trick on me.”

Falanya burst out laughing.

Beside her, Lowellmina gave a mischievous grin. “Oh, I’ve heard of those fairies. If I remember correctly, they visit dishonest merchants at night.”

“I see! Well, I’ve heard they are known to choose the wrong target on occasion.” Cosimo shook his head in consternation.

Lowellmina was giggling as she leaned over to Falanya. “What do you think? You should really be careful to not let your guard down around Mayor Cosimo.”

Falanya touched shoulders with Lowellmina. “It seems that way. If you give him the opportunity, he’ll deceive you before you know it.”

As the two stared at him, Cosimo gave a wry smile and threw his hands up in defeat.

“I fear I have fallen into your disfavor. I shall withdraw until my financial matters have been put into order—Please enjoy the banquet, Your Highnesses.”

With a bow, Cosimo left the two and went to mingle with other guests.

Falanya let out an internal sigh of relief. She was surprised after suddenly

getting embroiled in a conversation, but as expected of a mayor, he was clever and witty. The interaction had ultimately put her at ease.

"Well," Lowellmina said, interrupting her thoughts. "Now that we've had an enjoyable time with Mayor Cosimo, Princess Falanya, allow me to guide you to our guests of honor since you have come all this way."

This proposal seemed to come out of nowhere.

The guests of honor. The three Imperial princes. Falanya glanced toward the center of the reception area. It had been swarming with people ever since she arrived. She imagined the princes were in the middle of it.

…Wh-what should I do?

Accomplishing her goal meant breaking into that crowd and standing before them. But the sea of people was made up of influential figures with established reputations. Falanya was worried whether she could actually inject herself in that conversation.

But the banquet wasn't going to last forever. The princes had to have their own preparations to make before the summit. If she was careless, she would miss her chance. But if Lowellmina was acting as their intermediary, Falanya could make the most of this situation. On the flip side, if Lowellmina was the one to introduce her, the other attendees would note the close relationship between Natra and the Imperial princess.

Should she prioritize her goal? Or should she aim to resolve things on her own?

Falanya was filled with momentary indecision, but before she could settle on a conclusion, Lowellmina gently gripped her hand.

"Well then, let us go."

"Wait. What—"

Lowellmina was acting like this was no big deal, and Falanya began to follow out of reflex. Two or three steps later, the young princess realized she had no choice in the matter.

Sh-she got me…!

With Lowellmina dragging her along, Princess Falanya made her way toward the princes. It seemed simple on the outside. But there were multiple layers and implications to the situation.

Lowellmina had managed to lower Falanya's guard by taking her side during their conversation with Cosimo. And when that happened, Lowellmina pounced.

In a fluster, Falanya craned her neck to look back at Ninym, who shook her head. If the princess cast aside Lowellmina's hand, it would draw the attention

of everyone around her. It would only lead to unnecessary complications.

U-um… I should find a good reason to let go…

Falanya tried to think of something, but Lowellmina was already one step ahead of her.

“Princess Falanya, how much do you know about my older brothers?”

“U-um, a certain degree.”

“Oh, is that true? How are they perceived in Natra?”

“Um, well…”

Lowellmina started to unleash a stream of random topics.

Falanya was trying to answer and simultaneously think of a good plan. But that did not pan out too well.

Enough! I can’t collect my thoughts! Falanya was screaming on the inside.

Lowellmina was worming herself into Falanya’s brain by overloading her with information. And worst of all, Falanya knew there was nothing she could do.

She’s the worst! Falanya felt a rush of indignation, glaring at her.

Unsurprisingly, Lowellmina looked calm.

During this exchange, they arrived at the front of the throng of people. Falanya watched as the crowd parted when they noticed Lowellmina. Standing before them were three men.

“—My dear brothers. May I have a moment of your time?” Lowellmina called out.

All eyes fell on her.

Falanya had no choice but to go along with it. She steeled herself.

“What is it, Lowellmina?” one of the men asked.

He sounded like he was in a bad mood, but Lowellmina pretended not to notice.

“I want to introduce you to someone,” she prompted, nudging Falanya toward the three.

These are the princes of the Empire—

The eldest prince, Demetrio. His garments were the flashiest. He seemed to look down on both her and Lowellmina.

The middle prince, Bardloche. He had the build of a military man and a deep scar on his face. He stared at them with sharp eyes.

The youngest prince, Manfred. He was young, maybe a bit older than Wein, with elegant features. He looked at her with curiosity.

“—It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the crown princess of the Kingdom of

Natra, Falanya Elk Arbalest.”

As she bowed to the princes, she recalled a conversation with Wein before she had left.

“—Next, the Imperial princes.”

After briefing her on Lowellmina, Wein had continued to the following topic.

“First, the eldest prince, Demetrio. As the oldest among the three, he has the backing of the most conservative noble families. Basically, they only support him because he’s the eldest. There’s nothing noteworthy about his abilities or personality. Well, he’s the prodigal son.”

“…A little like Lord Geralt, who passed away after that recent accident.”

“He isn’t quite that bad… I hope.” Wein’s cheek twitched. That incident had been too unexpected, even for him.

“Next, the middle prince, Bardloche. His main backers come from the military. Apparently, he’s a great fighter, since a renowned soldier trained him from an early age. He’s even led his forces into battle as a general.”

“Hmm… Hey, Wein, why can’t he be the Emperor?”

Bardloche fit the image of a strong emperor that many in the Empire longed for.

But Wein shook his head. “He focuses on military affairs to the detriment of everything else, possibly because of his personal history. And he tends to disrespect civil officials. He wants to be more ironfisted with any provinces that won’t fall in line, and that’s made him some enemies.”

Falanya found this answer persuasive. As she learned by watching Wein, she had started to develop a vague understanding about the importance of balance when running a nation.

“Last is the youngest, Manfred. His support comes from the nouveau riche. It helps that he has a silver tongue. He keeps making promises to people that he’ll deliver ‘once he becomes the Emperor,’ which is how he’s managed to secure the cooperation of many provinces.”

“Is that…all right?”

“Who knows? Maybe he’ll keep his promises, or he’ll declare them null and void once he’s on the throne… He’s the hardest to read of the three. You should definitely watch out for him.”

Wein shrugged and went on. “Well, the princes are all in the same boat. Their support has flagged, because they messed up with a botched rebellion and the princess has been performing well. They’re looking at the summit as their

chance to make a comeback. They're planning to use it as an opportunity to persuade any important attendees, Mealtars, and Lowellmina to join their factions."

"Ah, that's right. The princes haven't realized her true goal yet and still see her as someone to win over."

This oversight could be attributed to Lowellmina positioning herself in just the right way. They would crush her if she was an obvious rival competing with them for the throne. But she had done a skilled job at portraying herself as a princess who simply acted out of love for her nation. Each prince was scheming to get her on his side, so the reputation of his faction would soar. For this reason, she couldn't afford to act recklessly. Falanya thought it was diabolical.

"Plus, they aren't gathering so many major players together to win them over: They want to exert dominance over the Empire while it's ridden by turmoil."

It had been a year since the Earthworld Empire lost its emperor. But the princes remained in a standoff, and the next ruler was still yet to be decided. Naturally, the entire nation was in a state of perpetual anxiety.

They had invited people to this summit that would normally only be attended by the rightful heirs to the throne to prove that their influence had not faded—and to show they were mature enough to solve this with words.

"In any case, that about sums up the three princes. When you meet, I imagine they will study you closely to gauge the relationship between Natra and Lowellmina—and to see if they can undermine it."

"And even if they try, I will not let them."

"Exactly."

Wein stroked Falanya's hair.

"Make sure you stay on guard. You'll be surrounded by people you don't know, so you'll be under a lot of pressure. And don't forget to be careful out there. With you looking so cute, I imagine men are going to try to chat you up outside of the political sphere. Turn them down."

"Please, Wein. You don't have to tell me twice." Falanya's cheeks puffed out as she faced her overprotective brother.

"I know. But big brothers always worry about this kind of thing," Wein said, still stroking her hair.

Back to the present.

With the eyes of the princes and murmuring crowd on her, Falanya finally understood why Wein's fears had not been unfounded.

Falanya had appeared before her fair share of large crowds at balls and other events in Natra. But the weight she currently felt on her shoulders threatened to crush those humble experiences.

…*But.*…

Her brother had entrusted her with an important duty. This was no time to be scared.

Falanya looked straight at the princes.

"—Well, that is a surprise."

The first to speak was the youngest prince, Manfred.

"I'd heard your name, Princess Falanya, but I never expected you to be this lovely. I wish we had become acquainted earlier," he noted with the light and easy eloquence of a master musician.

"Oh!" he then exclaimed theatrically. "Please forgive me. I am the youngest prince of the Earthworld Empire, Manfred Earthworld. It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess Falanya."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Prince Manfred."

The next introduced himself in a low voice.

"I'm Bardloche, the second prince… I see the younger sister of the rumored Prince Wein has come in his stead."

"I am terribly sorry. As prince regent, he was unable to get away from his many duties."

"So I've heard. Looks like he really showed the West a thing or two. I thought I'd get a chance to talk to him. That's too bad."

The last to offer his comments was the hostile eldest prince.

"…I'm the eldest prince of Earthworld, Demetrio."

Something about his voice signaled he was displeased.

"Thank you for coming all the way from the far north. But this is a crucial event for the Empire and our ally nations. Sending the crown princess…"

His eyes bored into Falanya.

"…leads me to believe you're looking down on us."

"No, we'd never…"

That left Falanya flustered. She had expected him to be outwardly welcoming to win people over, but Demetrio had just proven her wrong.

The swarm of influential guests seemed just as surprised. They must have expected him to cut off their alliance or do something similarly drastic because

they paid extra close attention to the tense conversation.

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“Of all the things to say—” Lowellmina cut in.

“We’ve invited Natra to a ceremony to celebrate the unity between Mealtars and the Empire. I know it’s unfortunate we cannot meet Prince Wein, but I think it’s heartless to deem her unworthy of your time.”

Everyone knew the true purpose of the gathering: the Summit of the Imperial Children, a matter of utmost importance to the Empire. But in the public sphere, they had gotten together for another reason—for this ceremony—which Lowellmina had just reminded Demetrio.

He glared at her in silence. But she didn’t flinch, meeting his gaze and pressing him further.

“Don’t you agree, Manfred?” she asked another prince.

Finding himself in the conversation, Manfred quickly surveyed the scene and shrugged.

“It seems we’ve caught Demetrio in a foul mood. Here, Princess Falanya. Come with me. Let us chat.”

It seemed Manfred had decided it would be more strategic to get closer to Natra than follow Demetrio’s lead. Manfred gently extended his hand to Falanya.

However, it wasn’t as though Bardloche would allow this to pass without comment.

“Wait, Manfred. I’m interested in hearing what Natra has to say.”

“Bardloche, you’re in for a reality check: I know you’re a warmongering moron, but have you ever heard of ‘waiting for your turn’?”

“In that case, you should be conceding to me, *little brother*.”

Just when Lowellmina had helped Falanya sidestep Demetrio’s verbal assault, the Imperial princess had introduced a new source of tension between Bardloche and Manfred. Falanya couldn’t keep up with all these sudden twists and turns.

“—Your Highness,” Ninym whispered into her ear from behind. “If we stay here, we will be caught up in their argument. We should leave now.”

“B-but what should I say?”

“What about something like this…?” Ninym suggested.

Falanya nodded her head and turned to Manfred.

“Prince Manfred, I am flattered by your invitation, but I ask that you grant this honor to someone else for today.”

“Do you find me a disagreeable conversation partner?”

“Most certainly not—” Falanya said before taking Lowellmina’s hand. “I

have already promised the princess that I would set aside time to speak with her."

"What?" Lowellmina looked surprised.

"Hmm…" Manfred offered, searching for a true motive.

Since Lowellmina had been the one to make the introduction, Falanya would have already found it difficult to deny that there was a close relationship between Natra and Lowellmina. Given the situation, Falanya decided it was better to go all out and use Lowellmina as an excuse to leave.

Based on their current policy to remain distant from the fight for the throne, it was a last-ditch effort for Natra. But this was also the best way out.

"—That's right. I am very sorry, Manfred," Lowellmina said.

"I see… Well, a promise is a promise."

The princes assumed Falanya had been part of Lowellmina's faction from the start. This wasn't an odd request. Plus, Lowellmina benefited from pretending to be in an established allegiance. There was no reason for her to pass up this opportunity either.

"Well, now that I have introduced you to my brothers, let us be on our way, Princess Falanya."

"Yes, of course. Please excuse me."

Falanya bowed and joined Lowellmina. They walked together to the outer margins of the hall. As soon as they were out of earshot, Lowellmina began to giggle.

"Hee-hee. You did excellent in getting us out of there."

"……"

Though they had only managed to sneak off because Lowellmina had gone along with her plan, it was her fault in the first place for dragging Falanya to the princes. The young princess was feeling conflicted about this whole thing.

"Well then, Princess Falanya, what shall we do from here? I would not mind actually chatting together."

Falanya had succeeded in introducing herself to the princes. Lowellmina had succeeded in flaunting a close relationship with Natra. In other words, both had accomplished their goals. All that was left was to enjoy the banquet's culinary offerings and mingle with the regular guests, and then Falanya would finally be free! Though if she was being honest, the conversation with the princes had already exhausted all her energy.

She must have been an open book, because Lowellmina flashed her a dry smile.

“It might be best if you rest awhile. I will go speak with the other guests. My brothers are trapped by their followers, and I imagine they won’t disturb you again in the reception hall. I’ll see you again later,” Lowellmina said before leaving.

When she was out of sight, Falanya heaved a heavy sigh.

“Hff…”

“You did well today, Princess Falanya,” Ninym kindly offered at her side.

Falanya became timid. “Hey, Ninym, I, um…”

“No need to make such a face. You performed marvelously.”

“……”

Falanya’s face relaxed for an instant, but she quickly became dissatisfied.

Lowellmina had gotten the better of her. As Wein’s little sister, Falanya had hoped to report something worthwhile, but now she was full of regret.

But it was Falanya’s first time in dealing with foreign diplomacy, after all. This was the expected outcome when facing important and experienced people.

That compelled Ninym to say, “Diplomacy often becomes tangled by individual thoughts and heightened emotions, so it is only reasonable that things will not always go as planned. For now, we should rejoice that we have accomplished our goal.”

“…You’re right, Ninym.”

Falanya understood that outcomes were never certain. She felt guilty, but that was going to get her nowhere.

“I think I’ll rest for now. And when I feel better, we can brainstorm ways to help out Wein.”

“Yes, that’s the spirit.” Ninym smiled before her eyes suddenly flicked toward the reception hall. “…Princess Falanya, I am afraid I must leave you for a moment.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have some affairs to attend to. I will return soon. Please do not worry… Nanaki, watch over the princess until I come back.” Ninym turned on her heel and raced toward the hall.

Nanaki instantly appeared at her side, and Falanya tilted her head in confusion.

“I wonder what’s bothering Ninym?”

“Beats me.”

“Hmm… Hey, Nanaki, what are you eating?”

“A pastry. They’ve got more over there. They’re pretty good.”

“I want one,” Falanya said, and walked with Nanaki over to the table.

Beyond the reception hall was a pathway that Ninym followed. After a while, she arrived at a garden.

Standing at its entrance was a single woman. Ninym knew her face well. It was Lowellmina’s attendant, Fyshe Blundell.

Upon noticing Ninym walking toward her, Fyshe stepped to the side and pointed inside the garden. Ninym entered. Next to the fountain was Lowellmina.

“If it isn’t Ninym. What a coincidence that we would meet here.” Lowellmina genuinely looked shocked.

Ninym sighed. “Says the one who kept flashing me looks.”

When Lowellmina had parted with Falanya, she had given Ninym a meaningful look from the corner of her eye.

It was easy enough for Ninym to decode this as a signal for her to come and meet Lowellmina alone.

“Hee-hee, I’m joking. Am I right to imagine that you were the one to come up with Princess Falanya’s plan?”

“Wein told me to give her as much space as possible, but in a situation like that…”

“I bet you were surprised Demetrio would dare to say such things to her face.”

“Our alliance nearly fell apart. Honestly, what was he thinking?”

Ninym could understand if this had happened after the Empire had settled down. In that scenario, he could have picked a fight with Natra over something random and destroyed them at his leisure. But he had tried to make more enemies while the embers of civil war were still hot. It was madness.

Lowellmina answered her question flawlessly. “It’s simple: He’s the eldest son. Wein is doing well in Natra, and Wein’s little sister has come instead.”

“…I still don’t get it.”

“It’s all about pride. He’s the eldest prince of the Earthworld Empire—the greatest power of the Eastern continent! But his reputation isn’t the best, and it’s looking like his younger brothers may oust him. On top of that, their northern ally is performing well in the East *and* the West! Plus, Crown Prince Wein is younger than him! And as a kicker, Prince Wein has sent his younger sister to the gathering where Demetrio might be crowned emperor! My older brother must find it intolerable.”

“…I wouldn’t call that rational.”

“If he’d been born with a brain, he’d be sitting on the throne by now,” Lowellmina said with a giggle.

Ninym let out another sigh and changed the subject.

“Fine, let’s leave it at that. What business do you have with me? I don’t want to leave Princess Falanya alone for too long. Please make it brief.”

“Hey! Who’s more important to you: me or the princess?”

“Princess Falanya. That should be obvious.”

“Aww! How could you, Ninym?”

“……” Ninym remained silent and turned on her heel.

“Ah, wait. Time-out. I was just kidding.”

“I’m busy.”

“I can’t believe you’re so cold after we’ve gone so long without seeing each other. But that’s what I love about you!—Oh, please don’t leave!”

“If you’re not going to get to the point, I will report to Wein that Fattymina has doubled in size.”

“That’s harassment! …Fine. There’s obviously only one thing that I’d call you for: Would you like to make a deal?”

“What kind of deal?”

“I want Princess Falanya to openly declare that Natra supports me.”

Ninym narrowed her eyes. “Isn’t it already known that you have connections with Natra?”

“Yes, thanks to you. But I need one more push. It would have been one thing if the acting leader of Natra had actually come and done the same thing as Princess Falanya. But everyone is bound to question whether she represents the official position of Natra.”

“……”

Ninym understood where she was coming from. This was Falanya’s first foray into diplomacy. On the flip side, it was the first time other nations had a chance to engage with her.

In other words, no one knew her standing as a diplomat—or even if she had the ability to influence her own nation at all.

If she had kept a promise made to another nation as the representative of Natra, she would hold more value as a diplomat. On the other hand, if she did not have a say in international politics, Falanya would be reduced to a sight for sore eyes and not much else.

Of course, it would be hard to imagine someone from the royal family not

having an impact…but the other nations must think she can't fully represent the kingdom, since Wein is the official leader.

That was why this final push was necessary. Lowellmina wanted a public declaration that Natra would side with her. If a member of the royal family made such an announcement, there would be no room for doubt.

"Do you think you could put in a good word for me, Ninym? If it came from you, I think she would be inclined to agree. Please?" Lowellmina made it sound as if she was asking for a small favor.

With her fine features, she certainly looked very sweet.

But Ninym remained cool. "What will we get in return? I imagine you prepared something to hold up your end of the 'deal.'"

"Of course. Incidentally, what do you think it is? If you answer correctly, I'll tell you one extra bit of information."

"I don't care. Just tell me."

"Hmph. Be that way." Lowellmina pursed her lips in disappointment. And in the next moment, her eyes housed something terrible.

"It's about the summit." Her lips curled into a smirk. "Don't you want to know more about the meeting that'll only be attended by me and the princes?"

"……"

If Ninym had been some other foreign bigwig, she would have pounced without missing a beat.

After all, they were talking about the private meeting that could literally decide the fate of the Empire. What deals would be struck? Where would their choices take them? It wasn't an exaggeration to say every word that passed behind those closed doors was worth a fortune.

It was bold of Lowellmina to choose this moment to play her hand. It made clear she had her eyes on Natra and that now was the best opportunity to bargain with her target.

"…You all certainly are clever."

"I wouldn't say that," Lowellmina reflexively responded. An instant later. "…'You *all*'?"

Lowellmina went instantly on alert.

Ninym was suddenly all smiles. "You know, Wein prepared an answer in case you came to us with a deal, Lowa."

There were two potential paths. One was where Falanya would deflect Lowellmina's advances and keep a safe distance from the battle for the throne. The other was where Lowellmina would get the better of them and Natra would

be considered her potential ally.

Wein had been expecting Lowellmina would bring up this bargaining chip, no matter the path they were on.

"…What did he say?"

Ninym offered up Wein's answer. "I'll tell you verbatim: 'Back off. I don't need a deal.'"

"……" Lowellmina was silent for a few seconds. "I see… Wein views the most important event for the Empire as a stepping stone for his younger sister."

Then she glared at Ninym—and at Wein through his proxy. "It seems we've been snubbed."

Ninym snorted derisively. "If you don't want to be treated that way, pick up the pace and choose an emperor. Otherwise, nothing will change even if you continue talking, Imperial candidate."

The two stared icy daggers at each other for a few seconds, which was more than enough time for the faint of heart to swoon. Lowellmina was the first to break off her gaze.

"—This is unfortunate, but I guess you leave me little choice. If that's the case, I suppose I will shift my attention to solidifying my schemes at the summit."

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“I am cheering for you.”

“Wow. How sincere.”

“My heart is already taken. If you have nothing more to say, I’ll be heading back.”

“All right—Oh, just a moment.” Lowellmina held Ninym back before she could turn away. “You’ve come all this way, so I’ll tell you that extra piece of information I mentioned.”

“Even though I didn’t answer correctly?”

“Call it a participation award. Lend me your ear.” Lowellmina whispered something almost unintelligible.

Ninym’s eyes widened in surprise. “Is that true?”

“It is.” Lowellmina nodded, smiling mischievously. “Those two are on their way here.”

“Hmm…”

Keeping to a corner of the reception hall, Falanya whimpered like a small animal.

“Well? Did you figure it out?” asked the boy next to her, Nanaki.

“Sort of…” Falanya’s eyes zeroed in on a group on the right edge of the room. “It seems…that the man over there has been talking the entire time, but the people around him aren’t interested.”

“You’re right,” Nanaki replied. “The attendees are used to keeping up appearances. But they tend to put all their energy into maintaining their expression—and neglect to care about the position of their feet. Look at how they’re all pointed in different directions. It’s a sign their minds are checked out.”

Nanaki was right. None of the people around the talking man had their feet facing toward him. Most were pointed toward the center of the hall—toward the Imperial princes.

“Are you always people watching, Nanaki?”

“I’m a guard. It comes with the job,” he replied curtly. “Anyway, why did you suddenly ask me to teach you how to read body language?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I want to help Wein,” Falanya answered, as if it were the only logical answer. “I failed this time. It must have been because I let Princess Lowellmina control the flow of the conversation. I want to observe the other guests to learn how to take and hold the initiative in a discussion. That way I can

use it at the next opportunity. Right?"

"You don't know if there will be a 'next time.'"

"But if there is, I'll be able to stand tall. I want to get revenge against Princess Lowellmina."

Falanya's eyes burned with a sense of duty.

Nanaki didn't look the least bit interested. "In that case," he offered, "check that group over there. You can probably learn something from them."

He pointed to a tight cluster of people on the left-hand side. Though smaller than the one around the Imperial princes, a considerable crowd had gathered around one person.

"Umm… Unlike with the other man, all feet are facing toward the one in the middle."

"The speaker is petite, right? Being tall helps you stand out, but that also means it's tough if you're short."

"To draw this crowd, that person must be a great speaker, right?"

"And with clever use of gestures, the speaker has captured the focus of their sight *and* hearing. Conquering two of the five senses is huge."

Now that he mentioned it, Falanya remembered how Wein used body language to drive home points during his own meetings. It was a good reminder to study his mannerisms when she got home.

Falanya stepped forward. "Nanaki, let's go over and listen."

"Wait, in front of—"

"Huh? —*Meep.*" She felt something bounce off her face.

By the time she realized she'd run into something, she was on her way down. She could already imagine the crashing impact… But in the next instant, an arm wrapped around her back and supported her.

"Whoa. Are you injured?"

It belonged to a man who must have been in the military. He did not pitch forward as he held Falanya up with one hand. His formal outfit for the ceremony looked stiff and uncomfortable.

"Y-yes. I'm fine." Falanya corrected her posture and bowed to the man. "Please pardon my inattention."

"Not at all. It was my mistake for not noticing sooner. Think nothing of it." The man offered a cheerful smile. His uninhibited expression eased the hearts of those who laid eyes upon it.

Someone called out toward them. "—Glen, what's going on?"

Another man appeared, seemingly an acquaintance of the military man, since

they were on a first-name basis. This new arrival gave off a completely different vibe from Glen.

His formal outfit fit him like a glove, and his gaze was keenly intelligent. If Glen was a typical military man, he was a typical civil official.

"Oh, Strang. Nothing to worry about. Did you get what you needed done?"

"Yes, I've finished speaking with Prince Manfred—And who might this be?" Strang turned to look at Falanya.

"Oh, this is…" Glen trailed off. "Shoot. I haven't asked yet."

"…You really have to get it together." Strang looked exasperated. He faced Falanya. "Pardon my companion. I am Strang Nanos, acting governor-general for the Imperial province of Burnoch. And this is—"

"Glen Markham, humble soldier of the Empire."

They both bowed.

Falanya introduced herself. "A pleasure. I am the crown princess of Natra, Falanya Elk Arbalest."

""_____""

Falanya found their reactions odd. For some reason, they grew flustered after hearing her name.

She had initially thought it was because they were surprised by her rank, but that didn't seem to be the case. From their reactions, she could guess something else had thrown them off.

"Is something the matter?"

Glen was the one to answer, voice strained. "Ah, um, no, that's… My apologies. By Natra, do you mean the nation where Prince Wein resides…?"

"Yes. He is my older brother."

Glen and Strang exchanged looks.

Falanya cocked her head to the side. "Do you know him personally…?"

Strang cleared his throat. "No… He just happens to share the same name as an acquaintance."

"Y-yeah. Though judging by Prince Wein's stellar reputation, it's audacious to even bring both of them up in the same breath."

"Ah, I see."

Wein wasn't a rare name. And if these honest men were bad-mouthing their acquaintance, Falanya knew he must have been nothing like her brother.

Huh. I swear Glen *sounds familiar…*

Where could she have heard it? It wasn't an uncommon name either, so it must have been from some unrelated memory.

Strang spoke up. “I am terribly sorry, Princess Falanya. I hope you’ll forgive the rushed introduction. I am afraid we have somewhere to be. I am reluctant to part like this, but…”

“Oh, is that so? Take no mind of me.”

“Thank you. I hope we have the chance to meet again… Glen.”

“Right. See ya, Princess.”

The two turned on their heels and exited the reception hall. They must have had some rather urgent business.

“That Glen seems really deft. The other guy’s just a sack of bones, though.”

“Oh, really?” Falanya asked Nanaki.

“But I didn’t get a bad vibe from him,” he added, nodding.

Falanya had never seen Nanaki fight. But she knew both Wein and Ninym thought highly of his skills. If Nanaki thought Glen was strong, it couldn’t be false.

All of a sudden, Falanya felt the compulsion to ask a mean question. “Is he stronger than you, Nanaki?”

“It depends. He’s strong enough that I can’t guarantee how a fight between us would end,” Nanaki answered.

Falanya’s cheeks puffed out at his textbook response.

“…But it would be a different story if you were involved, Falanya,” he whispered.

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“Nothing.” Nanaki pointedly turned his face away.

Ninym returned at that moment.

“I apologize for the wait, Princess Falanya… Did something happen, Nanaki?”

“Nothing. Didn’t you want to listen in on that group over there, Falanya?”

“Ah, that’s right. Let’s all go together.”

Falanya set off with Nanaki in tow.

Ninym cocked her head in apparent confusion and followed from behind.

◆◇◆

The sun was starting to set on Mealtars. The city was awash with the red evening light.

And it was sundown, even in the far northern corners of Natra.

“…Phew,” Wein let out, tossing a sheaf of documents on his desk after

finishing some work in his office.

He glanced next to him—to where Ninym normally stood over him. Of course, there was no one there now. She was in Mealtars, acting as his little sister's diplomatic aide.

"…I'm worried," he accidentally let slip, quietly to himself.

"I'M! WORRIED! SICK!" Wein boomed as if the floodgates had opened on his repressed emotions.

"Ngh… I wonder if Falanya's okay… I know nothing will happen to her with Ninym and Nanaki accompanying her, but… What if? No… Unless…?"

Wein had taken the plunge and sent Falanya off with the delegation to Mealtars. She had wanted to go, and he had hoped it would help her grow. He had no regrets about his decision. None at all. But that didn't mean he wasn't worried.

"I hope she isn't working herself too hard…"

If Falanya could see him now, she would smile at him dryly. On his face now was the same worried look she had whenever Wein went off to a foreign country.

"—Please pardon me, Your Highness." Someone knocked on the door and entered the room.

"Oh, Revan. I've finished up the paperwork."

Revan was the Flahm who served as an aide to Wein's father, King Owen. He was currently acting as Owen's nurse as the king recovered. But since Ninym had gone with Falanya, he filled the role as Wein's temporary aide.

"Please let me take a look." Revan gathered the documents and quickly thumbed through them. "…Everything appears to be in order. With this edict, General Hagal will be reinstated on paper and in practice."

The aide's smile was a bitter one. "You were rather reckless, Your Highness. Using the general to smoke out the rebels and whatnot."

"It was originally a long-term plan. It was my fault for letting the West get the better of me… I've already got a ton of flak from Ninym about it. Try to go easy on me."

"Ha-ha-ha. It appears that you two have a fine relationship. Out of respect, I shall say no more on the matter," Revan said. "I would like to bring something to your attention, however. Those we have purged generally filled smaller roles, but we now have a few unfilled positions and domains. What do you advise we do?"

"There are Flahm with time on their hands, right? Move some of them around

for now.”

Revan looked surprised. “Assigning Flahm to positions of power will invite opposition from non-Flahm. And it may cause the Flahm in those posts to grow conceited as they become used to their new status. Is that all right?”

“Let me ask you: Do you think Natra can be picky about personnel?”

“……” Revan remained silent.

“Natra is getting bigger—geographically *and* economically. We need to bring to bear all available human capital, even if it means enduring cuts or bruises or thorns, or we’ll never get a handle on our situation.”

“I understand. Well then, as you wish.” He bowed, then seemed to remember something. “According to our schedule, the ceremony in Mealtars should be today.”

“You’re right. As long as it’s gone without a hitch, it should be just about over by now. Well, the real deal comes after that.”

The ceremony was just a prelude, after all. The real heart of the matter was the Summit of the Imperial Children that would follow.

“I really hope nothing happens…” Wein murmured.

“As I expected. You are worried about Princess Falanya.”

“I’m always the one going out. I’ve finally realized what it feels like to be left behind.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Maybe you’d like to take the fastest horse and rush to her side?”

“……”

“…Your Highness, that was a joke.”

“I know. I was just calculating if it’s possible.”

Revan broke into a cold sweat. “Please do not scare me like that… Let us simply pray for her safe return. That’s all we can do.”

“…You’re right. I guess that’s it.”

The rays of the setting sun streaming through the window began to dim.

Night would soon be upon them.

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The eldest prince, Demetrio.

The middle prince, Bardloche.

The youngest prince, Manfred.

Before the three Imperial princes, Crown Princess Lowellmina gave her declaration.

“Let us discuss the future of the Empire—”

In a secret room for just the four of them, the curtain was about to rise on the Summit of the Imperial Children where the fate of the Empire would be decided.

Chapter 4 | A Glimpse into Family Ties

“And finally, we need to talk about Mealtars.”

It was right before they had set off for the city. Wein had finished his explanation on the Imperial princes, just about ready to wrap things up.

“The city of Mealtars in Systio province was originally aligned with the faction of the eldest prince, Demetrio. This could be attributed to the influence of the governor-general who had just been appointed at the time.

“However,” Wein went on, “after the failed rebellion, Mealtars submitted damning proof of contact with the West.”

“Why would Mealtars do that?”

“The governor-general was the one who had ordered communication be made with the West, threatening the people to obey. They wanted the governor-general to pay—or so Mealtars claims.”

“……”

“Incidentally, reports surfaced that a donation of an enormous sum was attached to that evidence… In other words, they used the governor-general as a scapegoat and escaped investigation.”

This wasn’t the first time: Mealtars had lent money to the Empire under many other pretexts. In exchange, they received certain privileges. That was why the city was essentially an autonomous region for merchants.

Naturally, this meant there were no state soldiers stationed in the city. Any overt display of armed men would disrupt the daily flow of goods to and from the East and the West. Instead, the town employed its own guards.

Even from this example, it was obvious no outsiders could intervene with operations of the city. Even the Empire was aware of this. But by letting Systio remain unchecked, the city had exploded in power and value, while chaos in the Empire continued to escalate.

“Neither side could come to an agreement on a replacement for the dismissed governor-general of Systio. Mealtars is essentially in limbo, unaffiliated with all factions. That’s why the princes are desperate to get the city to join their side.”

For the people of Mealtars, defending their own interests had become more important than ever. It didn’t matter who became the new emperor as long as they could protect their livelihoods. This Summit of the Imperial Children would let them confirm who was the best candidate for them once and for all.

“Look at it from a different angle. Mealtars has managed to gather a lot of major players by flexing the name of the Empire. This event will be a huge opportunity for the city’s merchants. If they find the princess of little use, they can turn to some other influential party.”

“…I’m feeling light-headed.”

Everyone involved was pursuing their own various agendas, which had all gotten tangled into a knotted mass that no one could undo anymore. Just thinking about it made Falanya feel as if she might overheat from this information overload.

“Incidentally, Natra has recently become more prominent. There’s a chance some city officials may reach out to you. Unlike with the princes, there’s no need to maintain your distance, but—don’t get too comfortable either.”

Wein stroked her hair affectionately.

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Back to the present.

“Look over there. That’s our central market, the symbol of Mealtars.”

The carriage swayed, carrying Falanya and Mayor Cosimo on a tour of the city.

How did they get here?

It all started that morning.

The party had ended without incident the day before, and Falanya was free until the announcement that would be made after the conclusion of the summit.

She began to consider ways to fill her time first thing in the morning, when Cosimo paid her a visit.

“I rushed to your side to offer a tour of our city, if you would like,” he had said.

She couldn’t take this at face value, of course.

“What do you think, Ninym?”

“As Prince Wein told us, it would not be odd for Mealtars to offer us some hospitality. Mayor Cosimo wants to entertain you and appraise the condition of Natra under its new leader, Prince Wein. I have to admit I’m surprised he’s come himself… Isn’t he busy?” Ninym mumbled.

The ceremony to commemorate Mealtars becoming part of the Empire was not actually over yet. The exclusive party for elites was only the first day of a series of events that would last an entire week.

This was because everyone knew the summit was bound to get complicated behind closed doors. The extended ceremony gave the guests an excuse to stay in town, even if the debate over succession dragged on.

Though it wouldn’t approach the scale of the previous night’s party, organizing a grand ceremony wasn’t a walk in the park. It wasn’t hard to imagine that Mayor Cosimo might be busy with preparations.

And yet he went out of his way to come see me.

In other words, he prioritized building a relationship with Natra.

“What do you think I should do?”

“If you wish to appear humble, it would be unwise to refuse. Doing so would essentially say that Natra isn’t interested in Mealtars.”

“Wein said he wouldn’t mind if we get along with them, right?”

“Correct. Even if we don’t personally interact with all the merchants, they will think favorably of us if we show our goodwill here. Once Mealtars has allied with a faction, there is a possibility that faction will try to contact us through the city. But this would be a safe choice,” Ninym advised.

Falanya nodded. “I understand. I will go get ready. Please tell Mayor Cosimo I’ll be just a moment.”

“Understood.”

This was what led Falanya to set off on a tour of the city with Cosimo.

“—There is an astonishing variety of items for sale,” Falanya observed, alighting from the carriage and walking with Cosimo through the crowded market.

Both were notable in their own right. Of course, a vigilant attendant followed behind each of them.

“Everything I see is so curious, I cannot just focus on one thing,” she added.

“Here in Mealtars, we are quite proud of our selection of goods and the atmosphere we have cultivated.”

The scene before them made it clear that these weren't empty words.

Needless to say, the market offered many different varieties of fruits, vegetables, and meat. There were even processed foods and drinks made from these ingredients for sale.

Falanya's heart pounded when she spotted unusual clothes and other unfamiliar textile designs. There were displays with spices and delicate stonework, as well as stalls belonging to fortune-tellers, artists, and proud arm wrestlers offering prize money to anyone who could beat them.

"Our biggest shortfall is that we cannot offer fresh seafood as a landlocked nation. Freshwater and dried fish are available, however."

"Now that you mention it… Hee-hee. Mealtars gives the illusion that it has everything the land has to offer."

"Our goal is to someday make that a reality."

A shopkeeper called out. "Hey, Mayor Cosimo. You making the rounds today?"

"I'm giving a foreign guest a tour of our city. How are you?"

"Busy as always. If time were on sale in the market, I'd buy it at asking price."

"Ha-ha-ha! A merchant shouldn't say that. If time can be bought and sold, you should find a way to use that to your advantage."

This was obviously Cosimo's home ground. It was clear at a glance that the people respected him, based on how he casually engaged with everyone they encountered during their walk.

"Hmm…?" Falanya focused on one of the street vendors.

Lined up in front of a modest storefront were equally plain wooden boxes. They came in different shapes and sizes, but each could be held in one hand.

She wouldn't have been this interested if that was it. What caught her attention was the name of the item—a "trick box."

"Welcome, young lady—and Mayor Cosimo."

"Don't trouble yourself on my account." Cosimo raised a hand to stop the young merchant from standing up in a fluster.

"Is this different from a normal box?" Falanya asked.

The two exchanged looks. Cosimo nodded, and the merchant answered nervously.

"That's correct. It's a trick box. Try to open it, and you'll understand."

"Okay… Huh?"

Falanya tried to open the box, but the lid didn't give. She flipped it in her

hands, trying to find an opening, but there didn't even appear to be one. She began to suspect it wasn't a box but a chunk of wood. However, when she knocked lightly on the surface, it produced a hollow sound.

"…It won't open."

"There is a trick to it. If you do this…" The merchant brought out another box, pushing its side, which caused the section to jut out.

Falanya watched in curiosity as another piece of the box was pushed around, again and again, until it had changed to a square box. Its contents were fully exposed.

"And that's how you do it."

"Wow…!" Falanya's eyes sparkled. "Hey, Ninym, did you see that? Did you?"

"Yes. I'm surprised. They shifted the small pieces of wood like gears to turn it into a box."

"Okay. You take this and… Ah! There it is! If you press here…"

"Princess Falanya, I believe this is the next step."

The girls reveled in their momentary victory before sinking into despair as they tried to find the next piece to push around.

Cosimo watched them from the side, turning to the merchant. "I'm always amazed by this mechanism… But business seems slow."

"I'm afraid…I'm not the only one selling these," the merchant admitted. "Might I ask for your advice?"

"Hmm… I wish I could, but as the mayor, I can't favor one shop over another." Cosimo hemmed and hawed.

Falanya looked up from the box. "In that case, what if you paint the boxes?"

"What do you mean?"

"My brother says it's important to find a market niche or add extra value to your inventory to move a product."

Take for example the symbolism of flowers and crystals.

Some flowers were intended for your beloved. Others were offerings for the deceased.

Some stones attracted happiness. Others granted courage.

There were others, but it wasn't as though the crystals and flowers had come up with these meanings themselves. Be it merchant or noble, someone had a hand in coming up with the symbolism. And then it had caught on.

Of course, this practice of attributing meaning to flowers and stones had to be influenced by their colors, shapes, harvest, and quality. There had to be plenty of

other symbols that didn't stand the test of time. But by representing unique meanings, they had become more than just beautiful—and gained new value.

"I was surprised by the mechanism of this box, but I think it's a shame there's no decoration on the box itself. But if you make the ornamentations too fancy, your product might become too expensive for your customers. I think this can be solved by painting them."

"Hmm. And what kind of design might you have in mind?"

"Crests or portraits… Maybe even a closed bud that opens into a blooming flower when the box is unlocked."

Cosimo nodded in agreement. It was worth considering.

The merchant must have been business savvy, since the shop was in the central market. The shopkeeper's face became serious.

"Oh, my apologies. Please pay me no mind. I'm just an amateur…"

"No. Thank you for your input. I may consider other options, but I shall give you that box as thanks. Please, take it with you."

"What? Um…"

Falanya looked at Cosimo, who gave her a nod of permission.

"For merchants, no transaction is ever one-sided. If you have no issue with that item, please think of this as a proper exchange."

As he gave her a nudge, Falanya thought it over for a moment, then smiled. "Well then, I shall accept. Thank you very much."

"Of course. If you visit the market again, please feel free to stop by." The merchant bowed and saw them off.

Falanya and the others returned to the street.

"Hee-hee, I'll have to show Wein when we get home." She gazed at the box happily.

Cosimo was next to her. "I knew it would be vital to get an outside opinion. Painting the boxes is a simple concept, but I have never considered it, even though I have been here for a long time. I thought I would surprise you with a tour of the city, but it is you who have surprised me, Princess Falanya."

"You flatter me, Mayor Cosimo." Falanya waved her hand in embarrassment and changed the subject. "That aside, you mentioned you have lived here for many years. Were you born in this city, Mayor Cosimo?"

"Yes. Born and raised. I'm proud to say no one loves our city more than I do."

"I see. I'm certain Mealtars will continue to prosper under your leadership," Falanya offered in return.

“Oh, no. My power is trivial,” he said, shaking his head. “Because we are the main artery connecting East and West, we have fought against many nations, which means our history is drenched in blood. We’ve only been able to conduct our business in the past couple decades… Please look at that bell tower.”

Cosimo pointed to an edifice in the heart of the market. From one glance, Falanya could tell it was historic. A large bell hung at the top.

“That tower was built by a certain merchant, known for founding Mealtars. It’s said that after using his own money to buy temporary peace from the nations in the East and West, he invited merchants here, established the town, and turned it into a gold mine to prevent the military from interfering.”

He continued on. “Of course, it wasn’t just him. The merchants who succeeded him worked in the name of self-interest and love for their hometown. Mealtars became what it is today with their unceasing efforts.”

Cosimo seemed to notice his uncharacteristic fervor was showing and coughed in an attempt to change tack.

“…Please forgive me. It must be boring to hear me ramble.”

“I don’t think so at all,” Falanya said honestly.

She had been a bit surprised, but what he said was fascinating.

“As a member of the royal family, I’ve been studying history and politics. My brother says it will help me learn more about Natra and other nations.”

“Is that so? …In that case, I think I know something that might be a good learning experience for you.”

“What might that be?”

“Come here. It’s only a short distance away.”

Falanya and Ninym looked at each other and tilted their heads.

The mayor continued. “Mealtars was originally a part of Systio, which meant it was obligated to follow the province’s laws and ordinances. But because of its unique location connecting East and West, it’s always been necessary for this city to deal with new developments quickly and decisively. That’s why the Empire allowed Mealtars to manage its own government, adopting a two-house system.”

Cosimo didn’t say anything about how the city had bought these special rights as they walked along.

“A two-house system?”

“Yes. On the one side, we have the mayor and his parliament who are elected by the citizens. These members assemble to discuss operations in the city.”

“Hmm,” Falanya acknowledged.

She had seen the government officials and greatest minds in Natra meet around the clock to discuss politics. This was why it didn't take her long to understand that part of their government. But according to Cosimo, Mealtars had two houses.

"And what is the other one?"

"It will be quicker to show you directly. It's right over there."

Cosimo had directed them to a large building, an assembly hall. They passed through the formal doorway and entered inside. Then…

"____"

As soon as she entered, she could feel a wild energy. Then she heard a veritable storm of comments flying all around her.

Scores of people crammed into the space were all addressing one another. Each looked grave. Someone would say something, and a pen would occasionally glide across official papers.

"This is…" Falanya trailed off in shock.

Cosimo replied next to her. "A city of merchants should be led by merchants… This is what we've always believed in Mealtars. It's only natural, since a single policy can dramatically change business practices. But we can't make everyone a member of the parliament. Therefore, this citizens' assembly was established as a place for the common people to participate freely and discuss policies."

"…D-does that mean everyone here is a regular citizen?"

"That's right. They aid in shaping policies, since many of the topics raised here are brought before the members of parliament. That's why everyone looks so serious."

Falanya was floored by this revelation, for she had been born the crown princess of a monarchy. To her, it made sense that politics should be handled by those chosen by the royal and noble families. Civic engagement never once crossed her mind.

"Hmm… It seems the topic today is the construction of the city's water canals. I'm terribly sorry for bringing you all the way here for this boring discussion. Allow me to guide you to the next location—"

"*No.*" Falanya cut off Cosimo's proposal. "This is perfectly fine. That is, of course, if a foreigner is permitted to listen."

"Ah…" Cosimo felt a cold tingle run down his spine. "The…the citizens' assembly is open to the public. You are free to stay, but…"

"Then I shall take you up on that offer."

It wasn’t because Falanya had been feeling something besides genuine curiosity. The citizens’ assembly just presented a new set of values that had sparked her interest.

But the long-time mayor of the city watched Falanya in awe as she stared upon this assembly.

This girl…

As he observed her attentively from the side, Falanya stayed at the assembly building until the discussion drew to a close.

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It was already late by the time Cosimo returned to his manor. He knew the exhaustion showed on his face, but he skipped the bedroom and headed to his office. There was still work to be done.

“Welcome home, Master Cosimo.”

“Thanks. Good work today.”

His subordinate was waiting for him inside. Taking documents from him, Cosimo sat down in a chair and composed his expression.

“Let’s hear the reports.”

“Understood. The ceremony today has concluded without incident.”

Cosimo had been accompanying Falanya around all day, which meant he had to entrust the ceremony to his subordinates, but it seemed everything had gone well.

“There was a quarrel between our guards and the security staff of an attendee. The matter has been settled, but our men are definitely on edge.”

“We’ve got the most influential people at one ceremony. It’s natural they’d be tense, but to put the cart before the horse… Anyway, I’ll have a talk with the leader of the guards.”

“Understood. Please forgive me for making assumptions, but I guessed you would want to talk with them and set up a meeting in advance. Because the ceremony has been prepared for ahead of time, I believe it can be handled in your absence, but…”

“It’ll be bad for my reputation if I sit out multiple days. I plan on being there tomorrow.”

“As you wish,” he replied before moving on to the next topic. “As for tomorrow, shall I prepare people for Princess Falanya as I did for today?”

“That won’t be necessary. It would only invite her displeasure. Besides, I

already got a good sense of her today."

"I expected nothing less. What did you think of the crown princess?"

Cosimo stopped for a beat to gather his thoughts.

"Sufficiently educated. When she's older, she has the potential to do harm and good. At the moment, she's a country girl from a good bloodline.

"However," he continued. "There's definitely something about her."

"I have heard that about the prince, but is it the case with his younger sister, too?"

"If you mean to say I'm overthinking things, I can't really disagree."

In any case, he'd established some form of relationship with the princess. That was a success, and it would be enough for now.

But he had more important things to think about than the princess.

"—And how is the summit progressing?"

The notables in the city were holding their breath as they watched over this meeting. Cosimo was no different. He was taking every measure possible to keep up on the latest news.

"As for that—"

And then the subordinate started to give his report.

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"Agh! How annoying!" someone barked. It bounced off the walls.

The voice belonged to the eldest prince, Demetrio. He was in his temporary residence, and a subordinate nearby stood in fear at his master's wrath.

"Y-Your Highness, I beg you, please settle down…"

But his attempt to pacify the prince only added oil on the fire.

"Who gave you the right?! Who do you think I am?! I'm the Earthworld Empire's eldest prince, Demetrio! I'm the man who carries the blood of the greatest emperors on this continent! You think you can just order me around?!"

"N-no, I would never…! Please, forgive me…!" His inferior bowed in a fluster as Demetrio spewed abuse.

The prince did not lower his voice. "Absolutely nothing has been accomplished! Yesterday *and* today!"

It was the second night of the ceremony and the summit. But they were no closer to reaching an agreement. If he'd been as smart as Wein, he would have predicted that much.

"My stupid brothers need to know their place! Why can't they understand

that passing me up for the throne is an act of disrespect worthy of death?!" he roared.

Demetrio had no doubt he would be crowned emperor. He was certain he was the only one who possessed that right.

But in actuality, the other two princes had been born with that right, too. Despite this, none of the three princes had a winning hand, and if they kept on with their factional rivalry, nothing was going to get solved.

Lowellmina was hoping for their foundations to crumble, but she was a facilitator for the summit, which meant she wouldn't side with any one person.

At this rate, we'll get nowhere…!

Demetrio would naturally feel that way. They'd brought together all these important people and hinted at a resolution. If they didn't deliver a single thing, the level of disappointment that would spread across the nation would be incomparable.

"…What are those idiots up to?! Give me the latest!"

"Y-yes!"

If they were unable to work something out, he had to break down the support from the other factions. He needed information for that, which was why Demetrio had his troops keep an eye on all the big shots staying in Mealtars. The other two princes were no doubt using their troops in the same way.

"There are no major changes in either camp. On the first day, they made every effort to secure the trust of the attendees…"

"Is that all? That's completely useless! Isn't there a single bit of news that will give me an advantage?!"

"Um…" The subordinate's mind raced, coming up with something out of desperation.

"Y-yes. It is a matter unrelated to this summit, but there has been a report that Mayor Cosimo went to see the crown princess of Natra and guided her around the town."

"What…?!"

Cosimo and Mealtars disgusted Demetrio. In fact, he actively loathed them. Mealtars had originally been aligned with Demetrio. They'd cooperated with the West during the recent rebellion and blamed it on the governor-general when things started going bad.

In the end, Mealtars chose to put on an air of neutrality. When the princes gathered in the city, its people feigned ignorance, betting on who might win. This was a den of shameless citizens, lacking all logic, morals, and dignity.

Demetrio had basically disowned them. He'd been tempted to snap Cosimo's neck throughout the ceremony.

Then there was this news that Cosimo was getting cozy with Natra. Demetrio didn't hesitate to express his displeasure.

"That senile old man! Ignoring *me* to butter up to Natra? It only proves he's losing it!"

He redirected his anger toward the small kingdom. "Damn Natra! Sending a little girl when we're trying to decide on the next emperor? Now that's unforgivable! Even though the Empire generously offered them an alliance, these ungrateful bastards have forgotten their place, fawning over Lowellmina and trying to get on Cosimo's good side!"

Demetrio threw whatever he could reach, shattering them against the wall.

He hated his brothers, his sister, Natra, Cosimo, this city, all of it. He was supposed to be a forgiving emperor, a venerable position worthy of praise. How could they look down on him?

His frustration needed an outlet, and Demetrio had a flash of inspiration.

"…My stupid brothers haven't gotten in touch with Natra's little princess yet, right?"

"Y-yes. As of now, it's only been Mayor Cosimo… She's already sided with Princess Lowellmina. We believe it may be difficult to separate them."

"If that's the case, maybe those two won't butt in…" Demetrio's mouth twisted. "Threaten her if necessary. Send our troops for the girl."

"Wha—?" His subordinate balked.

Demetrio didn't seem the least bit fazed, excitedly continuing. "This is all it will take to send her crying home. I'll destroy Cosimo's reputation and deprive Lowellmina of one of her supporters. Ha-ha-ha, a grand idea, if I do say so myself."

"Y-Your Highness, but the leaders from across the continent are staying in the city, and everyone is watching. If you go through with this, you'll be jeopardizing your position…!"

"Isn't it your job to do something if that happens?"

"But…!"

"Shut it! Are you disobeying my orders?!" Demetrio shouted.

It was clear he wouldn't be swayed.

"…I understand. I will see to it."

The subordinate could do nothing more than prostrate before him with a mournful face.

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Meanwhile…

“—The clergy of Levetia is on the move?” Wein narrowed his eyes when Revan told him what was happening.

“Yes, they’re working in every country. We don’t have all the details, but they’re planning to somehow interfere in Mealtars.”

“…I thought they’d start in summer at the earliest.”

That past spring, the king of Cavarin, who was one of the Holy Elites, had been assassinated during the Gathering of the Chosen in his very own kingdom. Mass panic broke out in the West, where the nations were especially faithful to Levetia. The other world leaders, Wein included, thought the religious order would remain silent until things calmed down.

The Empire had decided it would be best to immediately host the summit, since it seemed like the West wouldn’t be able to interfere. However, against all expectations, Levetia had started to take action.

“Shall I send a missive to the delegation urging them to return home?”

“……”

There was no doubt Levetia was overextending itself. Even if they did manage to interfere in Mealtars, they wouldn’t take any drastic actions.

My most realistic guess would be that a new delegation might be arriving soon…

This was Mealtars. They’d accept an envoy from the West if money was involved. And it was entirely possible they’d figured out a way to take advantage of the summit.

Since they were on the move, it had to mean they had some sort of goal in mind. If Falanya got involved, could they put that goal aside?

Wein thought for a long while.

“—All right, I know what to do.”

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People tended to be unaware of what would capture their hearts.

Sadness and joy welled up when something unexpected strummed a heartstring. Given how most people were often surprised by their own hearts, understanding someone else’s should naturally be considered even more difficult.

That was precisely why Ninym was so concerned. *What should I do…?*

Falanya perched on a chair before Ninym.

The girls were in the civic assembly hall. Ever since Cosimo showed them the hall, Falanya had been visiting each day. When Ninym asked why, the princess said she was observing the citizens' assembly. Basically, she was crazy about parliament.

"Isn't it fascinating?" she'd said to Ninym.

Her enthusiasm surprised even the aide. But since Falanya's official duties were largely over for this trip, it didn't seem like a bad idea for her to listen in on an assembly in session. Plus, she had a personal interest in national politics. It was a meaningful way to spend the rest of her time here.

The participating citizens had taken a liking to Falanya, who was equal parts naive and charming. If anything, seeing her listen intently without interrupting their session brought a welcome relief to the heated assembly hall.

It was that very focus that had concerned Ninym.

"…Ninym, Falanya's at it again."

"Yes, I can see that."

As Ninym and Nanaki watched over her, Falanya's eyes bored into the person onstage. Her gaze was locked onto the figure as she remained still enough to be mistaken for a sculpture. It was as if she were trying to burn every movement into her mind. It was no ordinary concentration. Even Ninym had never seen Falanya act in this way. Back in their homeland, she had been cheerful and intelligent—and yet a totally ordinary girl.

But Ninym could see Falanya's mind was expanding from many contributing factors: It was her first time visiting a foreign nation. Attending a ceremony. Confronting her own nerves and failures. Reflecting on her own ambitions. Balking at the concept of a citizens' assembly.

"Should we let her be?" Nanaki asked.

"…I'm concerned, but let's just continue observing her for now. I don't want to stunt her growth. But if we notice something strange, we'll send her home by force if need be. Sound fair?"

"Got it." Nanaki seemed to melt into the shadows and disappeared.

Ninym looked at Falanya's profile and sighed.

Well, she is *Wein's sister…*

How would this experience change her?

Ninym's heart tried to hold down all her hopes and fears.

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The assembly finally adjourned late at night.

“Zzz…”

Falanya rocked in the carriage on the way back to their residence. She was already fast asleep, leaning against Ninym.

It was a wonder she had been awake for so long. Ninym gently combed Falanya’s hair. While the assembly was in session, the princess hadn’t broken her concentration even once. That kind of strain took its toll on both the heart and body.

If she continued wearing herself down, an admonition would be in order. It was difficult to put a stop to someone who was so passionate about everything, but this was part of a vassal’s duty.

“—Ninym,” Nanaki called out next to her. He was quiet so as not to wake Falanya. “People are following us.”

Ninym scrunched up her face. It was late at night, Falanya was asleep, and they were proceeding at a snail’s pace. Someone could even follow them by foot if they wanted to.

“Are they the same ones who were observing us earlier?”

“I don’t know, but judging by the way they’re tailing us, I doubt they plan to stop at looking.”

Which meant they were waiting for an opportunity to attack.

When Ninym realized they were in jeopardy, her eyes flared with anger.

“I bet there’s a trap set up ahead where they’ll close in on us from both sides. Take a different road to the guesthouse,” Nanaki guessed.

“What about our pursuers?”

“I’ll take care of them. Don’t bother speeding up the carriage. I’ll make this quick, and I don’t want to wake Falanya up. Ninym, keep an eye out for signs of an ambush. I’ll be back soon.”

Nanaki opened the door of the carriage as if going for a nighttime stroll.

Prince Demetrio had secretly ordered the five assassins to trail the carriage under the cover of darkness. Their mission was to attack Falanya, the crown princess of Natra. It would be a crime committed in a town housing the continent’s top leaders, which made it crucial that they work without arousing any suspicion. It was a tall order, but there was no going against Demetrio’s orders.

But her temporary residence was under strict guard, making it impossible to infiltrate without someone noticing. When they received intel that the princess was frequenting the assembly hall, they devised a plan to attack her on her way home. They estimated her path, laid a trap, and prayed the princess would be there in the dead of night when no one was around. It was a shaky plan, but the heavens had smiled down on them.

They're almost in the zone.

The trap would halt the horses, and they'd launch an attack in the midst of the chaos. Once they killed two or three guards, their mission to intimidate the princess would be complete. After that, all they had to do was quickly make their escape.

They could almost taste it…until the unexpected happened: The carriage went down a road that led away from the trap.

Ngh…

They'd devised the plan on very little information. There was nothing they could do about the target's unforeseen behavior. The main concern was whether switching roads was only a coincidence or if they had noticed they were being followed.

"They haven't changed the speed of their carriage… Looks like it was a coincidence."

"What should we do? Retreat?"

"No, this might be our only shot. We'll have to try something by ourselves __"

In that moment, one of the men looking at the carriage ahead noticed something: Illuminated by the moon and watchfire was a silhouette standing on top of its roof.

What…is…that—?

Something red shined in the darkness.

When they finally realized they were human eyes…a white shadow leaped before them.

"Wha—?!"

Blood sprayed through the air.

One man crumpled to the ground as blood gushed from his neck. His expression said he had no idea what had happened.

"Disperse!" someone barked.

The three men acted as fast as they could move. But their foe was one step ahead. Just when one jumped out of the way, the white shadow wrapped around

him. A moment later, the entire body was reduced to pieces that tumbled to the ground.

"No way…"

The assassins were dumbfounded by this madness. They had completed countless secret operations as Demetrio's pawns, and their abilities were no joking matter. They had slipped past plenty of defenses before and successfully assassinated more than one important figure.

Despite that, his two comrades had been cut down in seconds. On top of that, the true form of the shadow standing menacingly next to the bodies appeared to be a young boy.

They could not have known his name was Nanaki. But it didn't take very long to realize the young boy was not the average opponent.

The carriage will get away if I waste time…! But…!

He would die as soon as he looked away from the boy. This was no conjecture. He sensed the unmistakable feeling of oncoming death.

"I'll ask only once," said the grim reaper who had come in the shape of a boy. "Whose orders are you operating under?"

No one answered. Nanaki must not have expected a response, because he sighed in annoyance that he delayed. That was when they all struck at once.

One swung his sword down on Nanaki, while another thrust at him from the side. Nanaki dodged this double strike by artfully twisting away.

The third attacker threw a hidden weapon that Nanaki struck down with his knife, which caused him to lean over. The other two assassins took this opportunity to press the attack.

But this was a trap. As Nanaki dropped to the ground on purpose, he cut off the feet of the two who had closed in for a surprise attack. They let out bloodcurdling shrieks and fell to their knees. Nanaki mercilessly aimed his knife for their throats and jabbed.

Then the third assassin rushed in to slash at him from behind the other two.

Got him!

His timing was impeccable. His attack would slice through Nanaki, just as the boy had done to his comrades.

That was how it was supposed to go down.

"Wha—?"

He caught air. The space the boy had occupied behind the two bodies came up empty.

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How? Where did he go—? The man's eyes darted around.

And then he found his answer.

He had swung his sword…but the boy was on top of it.

"…You monster."

"And you've awoken its wrath."

Nanaki's knife flashed without warning.

"Your Highness, we're here."

"…Mmm?" Falanya mumbled, coming to her senses as Ninym gently shook her.

When she looked around, she remembered they were inside the carriage on their way back to their residence. Now they were outside the manor.

"It appears you were exhausted. Let us quickly ready you for bed."

She'd apparently fallen fast asleep. Although Ninym was the only one beside her, Falanya had been careless. She ran her fingers through her hair to fix her bedhead and checked her face for any signs of dishevelment as she watched Ninym descend from the carriage in her periphery.

Falanya's eyes shot wide open. Nanaki was sitting across from her.

"Aah…! N-Nanaki!"

"Hmm?" Nanaki tilted his head at her surprise.

Obviously, he would be in the carriage as her guard. But this meant he had seen her sleeping face. For a girl of her age, nothing was more embarrassing.

"Something wrong?"

Falanya buried her face in both hands. That meant he couldn't read her expression, which made him more confused.

"N-no, it's nothi… No, wait."

There was a chance he'd been looking outside the entire time. As a young maiden, it was best that she confirm this. It was almost impossible to ask him directly if he'd seen her sleeping.

"U-um, Nanaki…did you see anything strange on our way here?" Falanya asked timidly, observing him between her fingers.

He thought about this for a moment.

"Nothing really," he assured, offering a small smile.

In her heart, Falanya decided she had to immediately return to her room and check her face in the mirror.

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“—What was that?” Demetrio barked, lips trembling in rage as he listened to his subordinate’s report. “Did you just tell me they failed?”

“Yes…”

Demetrio raged like a dark cloud in the middle of a thunderstorm. His underling prayed his lightning wouldn’t strike him dead.

“The five who were sent to attack the carriage are all dead, and it’s been confirmed that Princess Falanya is still staying in her guest manor…”

The following had been the sequence of events: The other group who had set the trap and lain in wait never made contact with the carriage or its pursuers. They eventually went searching to see if something had happened only to find the bodies of their comrades on a road that deviated from the one in their original plan. Before any law enforcement could catch on, they collected the corpses and made their way back.

“…Let me get this straight: Five people not only failed to intimidate one little girl but also managed to get themselves killed?”

The subordinate looked distressed. Even nodding in response seemed too much.

“…The city guards have not caught on. We have already recovered the bodies, so I do not believe we will face any consequences. And—”

“…Again.” Demetrio’s voice was dripping with icy fury.

“Pardon?”

“Send out more men. We’ll do this again… No, our threats were too tame. Use every trick up your sleeve to kill that girl!”

The subordinate’s eyes snapped open. “P-please wait! After the first attack, Princess Falanya’s guards are going to be more alert! It will be much harder to carry this out without being discovered compared to our last attempt. Even if everything goes to plan, we would never recover from the blow of a scandal involving a dead princess from an allied nation!”

“What about it?! If it’ll cause the other nations to strike at us, I’ll just destroy them all once I’m the Emperor!”

“Please! I ask that you heed these words alone! If an invited world leader dies on our watch, the summit will be in danger! And if that happens, your enthronement will be pushed back…!”

“Nghhhhh…!” Demetrio ground his teeth as if trying to shatter them.

Why? Why was nothing working out? He was the eldest prince of the

Empire. The soon-to-be-emperor. Why did he have to be troubled with this junk?

If he'd been the type of person who could live and let live, Demetrio would have won the people over as a venerated figure and even become emperor.

But that was impossible for him. He wouldn't even have been able to forgive a pebble caught under his heel. He wouldn't be satisfied until he ground it into dust and asserted his own dominance. Even he was hopeless against himself. It was just his nature.

And so, he put his mind to work. There had to be a way…to hurt her somehow.

"…And there is."

The malice in Demetrio's head had brought him to his conclusion.

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"Your carriage was attacked?"

It was the day after Nanaki took out the five assassins. Lowellmina and Ninym faced each other in a room in Falanya's temporary residence.

The official reason for their meeting was for a second tea party between Falanya and Lowellmina. The rough idea was that since the first one had been at Lowellmina's manor, Falanya invited her over to reciprocate.

In the brief period while Falanya was getting ready, Ninym met with Lowellmina for a secret discussion under the guise of welcoming the Imperial princess.

"Who do you think it could be?" Ninym asked.

"Hmm… I wonder if it's one of the princes who's responsible. That is, if what you say is true."

Lowellmina had no proof of the attack. Ninym could have been trying to throw her off with false information. Therefore, she was working with the hypothetical situation.

"I think it might be because they think Natra has sided with my faction."

"Yeah, you make a good point."

Ninym was still processing the attack herself, but if anyone could gain from hurting Falanya, it had to be one of the princes. It wouldn't be strange for one of them to exert his dominance to prevent Lowellmina's faction from gaining more power.

"Which of the three do you think it is?" Ninym pressed.

"I do not have enough information to say. The eldest prince is unimaginative,

the middle one is naturally daring, and the youngest prince is self-assured. Any one of them might make such a bold plan."

"What a mess…"

They hadn't told Falanya about the attack. It would only frighten her. But that was only if they could resolve the situation here and now.

"Do you think there will be a second or third attack?"

"It would be hard to imagine there will be subsequent ones. They've already put themselves in danger with the initial attack. And the assassins were taken out. It's not easy to get pawns who will do your dirty work for you, which means their loss must have been huge. If it were me, I would withdraw." Lowellmina grinned. "Of course, that's just me. I haven't the faintest idea what my brothers are thinking."

"……"

If these attacks continued, they'd have to consider returning home early. There was a long list of things that Ninym wanted to follow through with involving the summit, but Falanya's safety came first.

"…If you all could just wrap up the summit, we could return to Natra already."

She looked at Lowellmina with reproach. The summit had been going on for some time now, but nothing had been accomplished. The entire city could tell it wasn't going well.

"Hee-hee. Are you concerned over our discussions? I can tell you care! Yes. Uh-huh. It bothers you! What a shame. If you'd accepted my previous offer, I could tell you how things are progressing! …Ah, wait, stop! You can't put me in a joint lock! I am the Imperial princess!"

"With all due respect, allow me to remind you that good fences make good neighbors."

"Says the one who's trying to pin me down—Ninym…!"

In any case, she could only keep a close eye on any new developments. She'd continue to weigh the scales, measuring the pros and cons for staying in the city. If they leaned too far toward putting Princess Falanya in jeopardy, they'd hurry and return home. That was Ninym's plan.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Pardon me, Lady Ninym." A lady-in-waiting appeared before them.

At first, Ninym thought she had come to announce that Princess Falanya was ready. But when she saw the distress on her face, Ninym stepped forward.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

“Y-yes, well…” The lady-in-waiting mumbled.

Ninym’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Prince Demetrio has come to the manor…?!”

They hastily prepared to welcome the sudden guest. He was an Imperial prince, after all. While he had come without notice, they couldn’t just ask him to come back at a later time. It was almost fortunate that they had prepared to entertain Lowellmina, because Falanya was able to greet Demetrio in no time at all.

Except there was a third party present for Falanya and Demetrio’s get-together: Lowellmina, who had arrived earlier.

“…Why are you here, Lowellmina?”

That was the first thing out of Demetrio’s mouth as he was shown the room.

“Why?” Lowellmina shrugged, glaring at him. “I’ve been invited to a tea party with Princess Falanya. *You’re* the one who’s barged in, dear brother. Don’t you think it’s inconsiderate to show up without notice?”

“What…?!”

They shot daggers at each other. Falanya was the one who gingerly kept them in check.

“I do not mind. Please do not concern yourself on my behalf. What has brought you here today, Prince Demetrio?”

The prince looked unhappy, turning away from Lowellmina, when Falanya brought up the matter at hand.

“…There is one reason for my visit: I have a proposal for Natra.”

“What could it be…?”

Falanya discreetly exchanged a look with Ninym, who sat next to her, but she didn’t seem to have the slightest idea either. Lowellmina was the same way. Her eyes were trying to guess his intentions before he could say them.

Demetrio was at the middle of their converging gazes.

“—I want to make Princess Falanya my wife.”

Huuuuh? Everyone besides Demetrio looked confused.

Falanya remained frozen in place for a few moments before returning to her senses. She doubted her ears.

“Make…me…your wife?”

“Indeed.”

There was no mistake.

Falanya puzzled. “Well… What brought this about all of a sudden?”

“I said something foolish to you at the ceremony.”

He must have known she would pose this question and prepared ahead of time. Demetrio didn’t miss a beat.

“In these turbulent times, it is important for the Empire and Natra to remain allies. To keep that bond strong, I imagined this would be the best action to take.”

“……”

It did make sense. But it was just too sudden.

He must have some other objective, right…? Falanya signaled to Ninym with her eyes.

Most likely.

Since Ninym knew about the attack, this situation seemed to have more layers to her.

I have a hard time believing that Demetrio dropping in to propose to Falanya has nothing to do with the attack.

Demetrio must have been the one to give the order. His goal was to drive a wedge between Natra and Lowellmina. But Nanaki had been able to fend their attackers off. Now the prince was scheming to pull her away from Lowellmina through marriage. That was how Ninym saw things.

But Lowellmina saw the situation a bit differently.

I can feel the evil radiating off his plan…

Lowellmina had known Demetrio since they were little. That was why she didn’t think this bold move could be for political reasons alone.

It was Lowellmina who had hit the mark.

If she becomes my wife, I’ll basically own her, Demetrio thought. *I’ll be able to mock and taunt her, and no one will be able to do a thing.*

The political benefits were a bonus. He was more interested in taking out his anger on Falanya for embarrassing him. These dark desires excited him.

If she gets in my way, I can get rid of her with the excuse of an illness or an accident.

And if that caused Prince Wein to revolt in anger, it would give Demetrio casus belli to crush his little kingdom.

This Wein character made a name for himself out of pure luck. If I take his head, the ignorant masses of the world will know which of us has true value.

Demetrio savored this sweet dream, imagining all those praises heaped on him. The first step to making it a reality was this marriage.

“…I understand your feelings, Prince Demetrio.”

Meanwhile, Falanya's brain had raced desperately.

"Thank you for taking our nations' relationship into consideration."

Falanya was royalty. She was aware that she would be married to a stranger for political reasons at some point. And when that day came, she would not refuse, even if she disagreed.

But this union was up to her father, her brother, and the senior vassals to discuss and decide. It wasn't something she could choose for herself.

"I shall immediately convey this to my homeland. After all discussions have concluded, we will send you a response."

This was Falanya's only course of action. From an objective standpoint, it was a completely reasonable reaction.

But Demetrio continued to pile on the unexpected.

"I would like an immediate response."

"Wha…?"

"It's better to tie up all loose ends so I can give the summit my full attention."

The proposal had been his idea in the first place. He was being absolutely absurd!

Lowellmina had something to say about this. "Demetrio, that is out of the question."

"I wasn't talking to you!" barked Demetrio to fight off Lowellmina.

Falanya jolted in surprise.

He turned to her, looking mad. "This union will benefit both our nations. There should be no reason to delay. Right?"

This is bad, Ninym thought.

It would cause unnecessary complications for Demetrio if Falanya were to take it back to her homeland. That must have been why Demetrio was acting so forceful. But accepting his proposal would put them in danger.

Princess Falanya…! Ninym stared, urging her not to cave to the pressure.

But Falanya didn't even have a moment to notice her. She was getting crushed under the weight of Demetrio's power. It was no wonder: She was a teenage girl who was being intimidated by a full-grown adult.

Wh-what should I do…? How do I…?

Falanya was battling against something that was greater than anxiety and fear. But she couldn't accept the offer so easily. That just barely held her composure together.

"Princess Falanya!" Demetrio boomed as if trying to wear her down. "Prince

Wein isn't here. The decision is yours to make!"

"——" It was like Falanya had been struck by lightning.

He had meant to drive her into a corner. But he had no way of knowing…that his statement was Falanya's saving grace.

…That's right! I'm here instead of Wein.

Her admirable brother had trusted her with a duty. Her frozen body melted to normal, as fear turned to heated energy. Her mind stopped racing and turned calm.

I bet Wein has bounced back from pressure—more times than I can count.

In that case, she would try to imagine how he would act. How would Wein get out of this situation?

Yes, Wein would first—

Falanya flashed him an easy smile.

"Ngh…" Demetrio recoiled.

It was the harmless smile of a young girl, but it seemed like her guard had gone up, building a thick and impenetrable wall.

"I understand your situation, Imperial Prince. However, a royal marriage is a matter of national politics. I am too inexperienced to make such a decision on my own."

"Wh-what…?!"

Demetrio couldn't detect any fear in her cool tone. On the contrary, Falanya could calmly observe Demetrio to a degree that surprised even herself.

That's right. I've seen this happen in the assembly.

She thought back on the citizens' assembly and its public speakers. Which gestures did they use to get their point across? How did they speak to make sure their voices projected? How did a public speaker think? How did they appeal to others? If she took full advantage of her experiences—few but rife with wisdom—it wasn't difficult to decipher Demetrio's behavior and motivations.

I can see his impatience and confusion.

No other emotions could describe how Demetrio felt. He had anticipated breaking her in seconds, but she'd suddenly recovered as if her heart and body were newly forged with steel. He would have never guessed he had been the one to instigate this change.

Ninym and Lowellmina were equally shocked.

Talk about waiting until the last minute… Ninym thought to herself.

She's changed since the ceremony. She's becoming more like Wein by the second, Lowellmina observed.

Their hearts swelled with admiration. The difference in Falanya was truly astonishing.

"…You're telling me you refuse to give an answer," he growled.

Falanya felt Demetrio grow more enraged.

He had no doubt that anyone else would have leaped in joy at a proposal from an Imperial prince. Demetrio never thought she'd reject him or put the engagement on hold. It was a huge blow to his pride.

"I have women lining up to be my wife. But I came here out of my own goodwill to request your hand. Will you continue to disrespect me…?!" Demetrio barked.

His angry gaze locked onto Falanya.

"I would do no such thing. I believe it is the utmost importance to deepen the relationship between Natra and the Empire. I am responding to your proposal with sincerity when I say we wish to review the matter properly."

But his rage had no chance of crushing her now.

He has no hope of winning, Lowellmina determined as she observed from nearby.

"Demetrio, I believe that is far enough," Lowellmina interrupted. "The answer won't change, even if you ask again."

He was in a rock and a hard place, and Lowellmina was lending a helping hand. Of course, she only did this because she had grown bored of this fruitless verbal tug-of-war.

"Silence!" Demetrio boomed, rejecting her help. "This discussion is between Princess Falanya, Natra, and myself! Outsiders have no business here!"

Lowellmina's only choice was to remain quiet. Demetrio glared at Falanya.

"Very well. Now that you have disgraced me, I have an idea! Once I become the Emperor, I refuse to continue treating your tiny kingdom in any preferential way!"

He was implying he would dissolve the alliance between their nations. Even Falanya was startled that Demetrio would blurt this out of fury.

"Hmph! Are you thinking it over now?! Well, it's too late. You will regret __"

No one present could have possibly expected this to happen.

"—If you're discussing matters concerning Natra, please let me join the conversation."

The door swung open. Everyone froze, eyes wide.

It was only natural. Before them was someone who by all rights shouldn't have been there.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Prince Demetrio," said the figure, giving a reverent bow—before smirking. "I am the crown prince of the Kingdom of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest."

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"W-Wein! Why are you here…?!"

Falanya had asked the question that everyone else was thinking.

Wein was right there. But he should have been in Natra taking care of government affairs.

"Oh, I was able to finish up work early. I figured I could still make it in time for the ceremony and got here on the fastest horse I could find."

Wein looked around the room.

I know I burst in here, but what was happening before I arrived…?

He'd heard from the surprised delegation members that Prince Demetrio had suddenly showed up at the manor uninvited. Wein had rushed right into the middle of Falanya's predicament.

In other words, he had no details about the situation.

But this wasn't a great time to try and get the facts straight.

What was he supposed to do?

…*Ninym, help!* Wein pleaded with his eyes, flashing her an SOS.

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Ninym came through as always. She scribbled the details on a piece of paper and discreetly lifted it to show Wein. He read her notes while continuing to speak.

“After all, this is about a marriage between Prince Demetrio and my sister, Falanya. I see no reason not to… Hold up! *Marriage?*”

Wein snapped his head up from her cue cards. Ninym nodded her head vigorously.

Whaaaat?! What the hell are you asking my sister, man?!

As Wein continued to be puzzled, Ninym showed him another note.

Um… Oh, I get it! Falanya couldn’t decide without asking me, and now he’s being jilted… Isn’t it bad that I’m here then?!

He’d waltzed into the room just as she was using his absence as an excuse to turn Demetrio down. Lowellmina had immediately taken note of this, looking at him with an expression that practically screamed, *What the hell are you doing?*

Although it took a while, Demetrio had recovered. His mouth twisted into a *things are going my way* sort of smile.

“I am delighted to meet you here, Prince Wein. Look, Princess Falanya, your brother has come to your rescue. You have no objections to the prince deciding on our marriage, right?” Demetrio suggested.

“…Yes, of course,” Falanya replied, nodding anxiously.

She could no longer refuse him, so she could only trust Wein would get them out of this mess.

“Well then, Prince Wein. Without further ado, I wish to ask your opinion about a union between me and Princess Falanya… I take it you have no objections?”

Demetrio was really pressuring them into this.

“—Of course! I’m all for it!” Wein agreed to Demetrio’s proposal without missing a beat. “If this works out, our relationship with the Empire will be rock solid. It’ll be a cornerstone to harmony between our two countries. Falanya, chin up! You should be happy.”

“R-right…”

Demetrio had never expected him to be this enthusiastic. Falanya looked visibly upset, but Wein grinned.

“This is welcome news—To think we’d have two unions with royalty from the Earthworld Empire!”

“What…?”

Wein’s statement didn’t immediately dawn on Demetrio, who blinked back at

him. As if setting him aside, Wein turned to the Imperial princess.

"Don't you agree, Princess Lowellmina?"

"…Yes, indeed." Lowellmina looked a bit worried at first, but then she had on a mischievous smile. "My marriage with Prince Wien was delayed due to the state of the nation, but I believe this is a fine opportunity to open up the conversation again."

"Ngh…!"

That was when Demetrio remembered: Lowellmina had gone to Natra the year before…to discuss marrying Prince Wein.

"If I marry Prince Wein, and you marry Princess Falanya, Natra will have a great influence on the Empire." *(You owe me big-time, Wein.)*

"My sister and I are looking forward to becoming part of the Imperial family. I might start having some unhealthy ambitions if you're not careful." *(Cut the crap. If anything, you owe me for what happened last year.)*

"Oh, Prince Wein! You can't do that. But you *are* a man of many accomplishments… I'm sure the people of the Empire will place their hopes in you." *(I've returned the favor through Princess Falanya.)*

"In that case, I'll do my best not to betray those expectations. Once our unions are officialized, I hope to work together with you, Princess Lowellmina." *(Come on! I don't remember you ever being noble, Lowa!)*

"Of course, Prince Wein. Let us join hands and help the Empire flourish." *(If you're going to complain, I'll leave you upstream without a paddle.)*

The two were on the same page in their conversation.

Demetrio hurriedly cut in. "W-wait! I forbid this, Lowellmina. You think you can just decide this on your own…?!"

"On my own?" Lowellmina parroted, shrugging. "The Emperor decides on all Imperial marriages. Seeing that we are without one, I do not see why I cannot choose for myself." She burst into laughter. "To use your own words, this discussion is between me and Wein… Outsiders have no business here."

"Nngh…!" Demetrio held his tongue when his own words were used against him.

If there were two marriages, there was no doubt that Natra would have more influence on the Empire. And Wein had basically just admitted to having conflicting interests. Demetrio abhorred the very possibility of it.

Dammit…!

He should have had them cornered, but he'd been the one backed into one instead. They had come to an impasse, and Demetrio couldn't find a flash of

inspiration that would save him. But he couldn't just pretend this didn't happen and scamper away. His pride wouldn't allow it.

"—With all due respect, Prince Wein…" Ninym quietly began. "Our kingdom has a tradition of forbidding royals from marrying within the same family. Although your partners would both be dignitaries from the Empire, it is not something that should be taken lightly…"

"Whoops. I'd forgotten about that," Wein said innocently. "This could be a problem. It was a revered tradition back in the old days…but it can impede progress to blindly follow the rules. What do you say, Prince Demetrio? It seems we're both facing unforeseen circumstances. I'll go over this with my people back home, and then we can set up a different meeting to discuss the details on another day."

There was, of course, no rule. Ninym had just made it up. When Wein had realized Demetrio was caught in his own trap, Ninym had thought this up to give him a way out.

"Y-yeah. I have no problem finalizing everything today, but if you insist, I can hold off for now."

Backed in a corner, anyone would jump at the first escape in front of them. As Demetrio responded just as expected, Wein held out his hand.

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Prince Demetrio. Let's discuss this again at a later date."

"…Very well. We'll talk then."

And this initial meeting with Demetrio came to an end.

After insisting he didn't need to be seen off, Demetrio left the manor. Lowellmina decided it would be best to return to her own residence.

"I shall take my leave for the day. I do not wish to intrude on this little reunion."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't spend more time with you, Princess Lowellmina," Wein offered.

"No apologies necessary. I enjoyed our time. Well then, I shall see you some other time, Prince Wein." And with that, Lowellmina left the room.

All who were in the room were Wein, Falanya, and Ninym…

"Wein!" Falanya immediately gave Wein a big hug. "I was so surprised to see you here. But I'm so happy!"

She rubbed her face into his chest, and he embraced her.

Wein smiled. "I was worried about how you were doing, but I guess it was all

for nothing. It looks like you're perfectly fine without me. You've been working really hard. I'm impressed, Falanya."

"Hee-hee!" Falanya beamed.

Ninym gave Wein a look. He knew what it meant.

Why are you really here all of a sudden? Ninym signaled with her eyes.

I've got my reasons. I'll explain later. The biggest one is I suddenly got the compulsion to check on her. I was worried…and deranged from no sleep and a long night of work.

Uh-huh…

Well, I finished all my tasks, so everything should be in order in Natra.

I should be worried about affairs in the Empire, Wein thought.

"But wow. I never would have guessed an Imperial prince would propose to you, Falanya."

"I was surprised," Falanya replied before becoming timid. "What do you plan to do, Wein…?"

Wein thought for a moment. "Good question… We're both royalty. Which means political marriages are inevitable."

Falanya nodded.

"And why it's important to choose your partner wisely." Wein stroked Falanya's hair. "I don't have even the slightest intention of selling you off to that guy. If he wants my little sister, he's gotta unify the continent—at the very least."

Falanya seemed a little annoyed by the grand prerequisite but giggled. "Then I'll never be a bride."

"Oh, really? In that case, maybe I'll ease up a little… But then again…"

As Wein began to look troubled, Falanya burst into peals of laughter.

"Well, we'll go at it step by step," Wein said. "First, would you mind if I take a breather? Riding here all the way from Natra has worn me out."

"Understood. I shall prepare a room immediately."

"In the meantime, let me tell you all about Mealtars. It's full of interesting things. For example… Oh! Right! Like this box," Falanya started.

"Hmm? What's this? It doesn't have a lid."

"Um, they called this a trick box."

"Oh, I get it. There's some sort of trick to it. If you press here, slide it around, then move this… Oh, it's open. That was fun… Wait. What's wrong, Falanya?"

"…Hmph! Fine! Be that way!"

Falanya turned to the side, leaving Wein wondering what he did wrong.

Ninym offered a wry smile and quietly left the room so as not to disrupt them.

It didn’t take long for the entire city to hear about Wein’s unexpected arrival. Thereafter, Mealtars’s political world would steer toward a new phase—

Chapter 5 | Upset in the Merchant City

"…I see. I think I get the gist."

It was the morning after Wein arrived in Mealtars. Ninym had brought Wein up to speed.

He crossed his arms. "I'm not surprised she was done in during the ceremony. And I knew you would turn down a deal with Lowa. But I never would have guessed there would be an attack and a marriage proposal."

"I'm sorry. If we had returned home right after the attack, we could have avoided the proposal."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Ninym. If I had been here, we would have stayed. Think of it as a good thing. Now we know to watch out for Demetrio… *Yawn.*"

"Are you okay, Wein?"

"I guess I went overboard. I'm pooped."

I'm gonna sleep for three days straight when we get back, Wein silently schemed.

"The real problems start now. The biggest two issues are how to peacefully turn down Demetrio's marriage proposal and get everyone home in one piece. If possible, I'd also like to sit down with Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred."

"I get why we want to prioritize the first two, but why Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred?"

"For starters, I want to get a good measure of their characters. And I want to establish some sort of ties with them for the future. Plus, it'll get me some insight into the summit, and I can dispel the impression that Natra is siding with Lowellmina's faction."

"Makes sense." Ninym saw where he was coming from.

On the first day of the ceremony, anyone could tell that Falanya and

Lowellmina were on good terms—which was a sign that the Imperial princess was friendly with Natra.

But if the crown prince took out time to speak with the Imperial princes, it would color the public opinion about the relationship between Falanya and Lowellmina—from political to strictly personal.

"Well, in exchange, it will lower Falanya's political credibility. But I think it's worth the effort."

"How will you get in touch with them? Will you have Lowa set it up?"

"That would be the proper way, but I don't really want her to lord it over me…"

That was the Lowellmina way. It wouldn't surprise him if she did him this favor and tried to make him repay it two-hundred-fold.

"But you don't have another choice, right? Especially since we don't have much time."

"True. I imagine Levetia won't stay silent for long. I'd better finish up everything before that happens…" Wein tried to think of an alternative plan.

Someone knocked at the door. It was a lady-in-waiting.

"Please pardon me. Prince Wein, two messengers have come to see you."

"Messengers? From where?"

"One is from Prince Bardloche and the other is from Prince Manfred. They have both extended invitations to meet with you, Your Highness."

Wein and Ninym automatically looked at each other.

"…Okay, I'll be right there. Have them hang around."

"Understood."

The lady-in-waiting left, and Wein chuckled softly.

"Looks like I wasn't the only one waiting for an opportunity."

"It seems that way. But which one will you choose, Wein?"

"Hmm…" Wein thought for a moment. "Well, you did say you hit it off with the mayor."

"What? Yes, he invited Princess Falanya for a guided tour around the city."

"In that case, we'll capitalize on that." Wein grinned as he stood up.

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As the mayor, Cosimo hosted many visitors in his manor—for politics, budget meetings, and sometimes darker subjects.

Inevitably, the reception rooms were constantly ready to receive guests.

Cosimo especially appreciated the aesthetic details and furnishings of the room where he welcomed members of noble families. It was his prided room, befitting of anyone.

But on this day, his bloated confidence had shrunk down to a little speck that could be carried off by the slightest breeze.

"I'm terribly sorry that this is all I could prepare."

Three people and Cosimo were seated together in the room.

"It's perfectly serviceable. We did come on such short notice, after all," said Wein, one of the three people. "I heard you really helped out my sister, and I wanted to express my gratitude, Mayor Cosimo."

"You're too kind, Prince Wein." Cosimo bowed deeply before turning to look at someone else. "Imperial Princes, should you feel inconvenienced by anything, please do not hesitate to inform me."

"Should be fine. Tea basically tastes the same everywhere."

"You have no class, Bardloche. But I have nothing to complain about."

The other two people in the room: Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred.

It was a three-man meeting between the royal families of Natra and the Earthworld Empire. Even Cosimo had reason to be tense.

"I never would have guessed you would send an envoy at the same time as me, Bardloche. You seem to have taken an interest in Prince Wein."

"Right back at ya. As calculating as ever."

"I'm not like you, Bardloche. I don't have your physical strength, so I have to depend on this brain." Manfred shrugged dramatically. "Nonetheless, I was shocked that Prince Wein would choose this place."

It was Wein who had chosen Cosimo's manor as their meeting spot.

Since their invitations had come to him at the same time, Wein normally would have had to choose one to postpone to a later date. However, that would not send the right message. Because he wanted to be on good terms with both of the princes, it would be in his best interest to avoid stirring up any negative emotions. Hence, this plan to meet them both at the same time.

He had strategically chosen Cosimo's manor as their meeting spot: The Imperial princes wanted to win over Mealtars, and Cosimo wanted to size up Wein and the princes for himself.

Which brought them all here.

"Looks like you got a good head on your shoulders, too, Prince Wein."

"Oh, not at all." Wein shook his head humbly. "You already know I've been in wars with both Marden and Cavarin since becoming regent. If I had been able

to see through their motives, I could have avoided it. I'm amazed by my own foolishness."

"Yeah, but you beat them," Bardloche replied. "I hear your army was inferior to Marden's and Cavarin's soldiers. I want to know how you still won."

"Oh, I concur. I would love to hear about how you led your army, Prince Wein. You're rumored to be the greatest war strategist of our time," added Manfred.

"That's an exaggeration. But I suppose I can share if you're interested."

Wein began to recount his time on the battlefield, and the meeting had a great start.

It expanded into a discussion on martial arts with Bardloche, followed by Manfred talking about the journal where he chronicled his trips in the Empire. The conversation seemed to take off on its own.

Of course, it was all superficial. Beneath the surface, they were all engrossed in their own convoluted thoughts.

Okay, let's map out the situation, Wein thought. *I'm here to convince them that I'm not a part of Lowellmina's faction and hint at my interest in supporting both of the princes…all without declaring anything openly or siding with anyone. I want them to leave this meeting thinking they can talk to me, even though they didn't get me to officially join their faction.*

That would be the best outcome for Wein. But Bardloche and Manfred had different goals. Wein had to find common ground with them.

When should I bring it up…?

Wein tried to find an opportunity as the meeting continued.

"By the way," Manfred started, "I hear that Demetrio showed up uninvited at your residence yesterday. If he did something shameless, I apologize on his behalf as a member of the Imperial family."

"It was no big deal. Princess Lowellmina happened to be with us and acted as a mediator."

The air grew still.

Wein had brought up Lowellmina. This would trigger all participants to discuss the heart of the matter.

"…You seem friendly with Lowellmina. From what I've heard, you were often seen together at the military academy," Manfred noted.

"It's strange that we get along well. She's an irreplaceable friend."

"A friend? Didn't you talk about marrying each other?"

"That's a matter of politics. We're definitely friends, but that's separate from

national affairs. Those discussions have been put on hold for political reasons." Wein smiled dryly.

If they didn't have peas for brains, the princes would realize the true meaning of his statement.

He wasn't infatuated with Lowellmina. He'd be willing to jump ship for the right circumstances.

It was blasphemous to compare and pit members of the Imperial family up against one another. Demetrio would have grown indignant by now, but Bardloche and Manfred weren't fazed. They had come into this meeting expecting something along these lines.

But they still might have a tough time deciding if they want to take these motives at face value.

He had gotten the ball rolling. How would they interpret this situation? Would they toss the ball back or drop it?

Wein sipped his tea and waited for their response.

It would be best for them to approach this topic in a cautious and roundabout way. Every word in this foreign negotiation had a potential to have a huge impact on national politics. They needed to carefully lay down the foundation, begin to understand the other side, and finally—

"Then join my faction," said Bardloche.

"B-blergh?!" Wein spat out his tea.

H-hold up! There are steps to this! You know there's an order to these things, right?!

Wein gaped at Bardloche for jumping ahead of the program, but Bardloche didn't seem to care.

"Lowellmina is a woman. I know her faction of patriots are gaining steam, but what's there to gain from a group that simply wrings their hands about the future? You'll contribute nothing to the world by supporting them."

"Ah, no, erm—"

"If I remember correctly, the Flahm are essential to your kingdom. Don't worry. I couldn't care less about race or region. I believe in meritocracy, which my subordinates know."

"That's fantastic, but, well, erm…"

"You were granted the right to team up with me when you beat Marden and Cavarin. Join me. I'm gonna need all the help I can get if I plan on unifying the continent."

"R-right…"

Wein's mind raced. He couldn't get through to Bardloche—for a different reason than when he was trying to reason with Demetrio.

And since Bardloche had addressed him in this direct manner, Wein couldn't respond with a noncommittal answer. It would look bad on him, and that wouldn't be optimal for future developments. Wein was trying to figure out his options when he heard a low chuckle, mocking Bardloche.

"A meritocracy? I never thought I'd hear that from you, Bardloche."

"What are you trying to say, Manfred?"

"Look at your subordinates. There isn't one person who isn't a brawny tactician. Are you sure you didn't mean muscle-ocracy?"

The princes glared at each other. Bardloche had the larger frame, and Manfred couldn't match the intimidating steel look in his brother's eye, but he didn't avert his gaze even once.

"Power is what the Empire needs right now. A strong country, an almighty emperor, a powerful army. Don't you understand that's the very foundation of this nation?"

"Neglecting internal affairs will run the Empire ragged. And we'll keep searching for the next place to invade to hoist our national debt on them. Like a swarm of locusts. I wonder when the Empire became a hive?"

"Says the one who's waited on hand and foot by a bunch of disloyal fools. You put together a ragtag group with empty promises. Do you think that will get you through these rough times?"

"You don't get it. It all depends on how you use those people. Idiots think it's better to gather the strongest fighters, but that's basically a declaration that their stupid brains can't think of a way to utilize the weak. It shows you're narrow-minded. Aren't you embarrassed?"

There was a creak…from the bones in Bardloche's angry, clenched fist.

It was a volatile environment, but Manfred bravely turned away from his brother. "Hey, Prince Wein. Don't you think so, too?"

What—?! You're asking me*—?!* Wein screamed inside. *Are you playing with me? Don't toss me into the fire after you've doused it in oil! I'll beat the crap out of you!*

It was too late for Wein to subject Manfred to a storm of scathing criticism. Bardloche's eyes turned to him, and Cosimo held his breath, unmoving in his seat the whole time, anticipating Wein's answer.

"…This is my personal opinion, but…"

Wein found it hard to get behind either. And he really didn't want to flatter

one of them.

That left him with only one option.

"…I have to say, you fight over the smallest stuff."

"What…?!"

"Hmm…?"

Wein could see his bold statement had lit a fire in their eyes and chuckled arrogantly, wishing he could just go home.

"Your respective arguments are sound. But they're nothing more than pipe dreams when you actually look at the situation. Your silver tongues won't help you out. Do us all a favor and bring the summit to some sort of resolution."

Crap! Wein immediately regretted. *I went too far*.

He had just wanted to say they were talking big, even though they couldn't even pressure their own brother out of the race for the throne. But he'd accidentally chosen fighting words. He readied his hidden weapon, waiting to see what they would do.

"—Ha-ha-ha!" Manfred suddenly let out a hearty laugh. "You're right, Prince Wein! Even though we've been bragging, we haven't managed to give Demetrio the boot!" He rose from his seat. "I enjoyed our time today, Prince Wein. Once we've settled things with the summit, I would love to chat with you again."

As Manfred left the room, Bardloche stood up as well.

"…Frustrating as it is, I have to admit what you say makes sense. I said you had all the makings of a subordinate, but I might be the one who needs to step up and prove myself as a leader," Bardloche said. "We'll meet again when I do."

He exited the room, leaving only Wein and Cosimo behind.

Cosimo wasn't trying to butter him up as he spoke to Wein with heartfelt sympathy.

"…Good work today, Prince."

"…Yeah, thanks," he replied with a tired smile.

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"Ah… I'm exhausted," Wein moaned when he returned from Cosimo's manor.

Ninym came to greet him.

"How's Falanya?" he asked.

"She's back at the assembly hall today. But we've increased the guards as you requested. And Nanaki is with her."

"Good." Wein nodded.

Ninym continued. “And how did your meeting with the princes go?”

She hadn’t accompanied him, since she had her hands full setting up the new staff and goods that came with Wein.

“About that… It looks like ordinary methods won’t work on Bardloche or Manfred.

“However,” Wein continued, “I accomplished the bare minimum. They see we have the potential to discuss things further… I think!”

“The last bit has me anxious…”

“Well, it’ll probably…definitely…work out… Anyway, anything happen on your end, Ninym?”

“Nothing at all. Except this.” Ninym held out a single letter.

“What’s that?”

“An invitation from Lowa to a secret meeting.”

It was evening when Wein and Ninym stood in front of the designated location. It was the tower that Cosimo had explained to Falanya earlier. The entrance was normally locked and only accessible during emergencies, but it had been open. The two stealthily entered, greeted by dusty air, and climbed the wooden stairs that led to the top.

“Geez, Lowa has a thing for these kinds of places.”

“Well, she enjoys coming up with schemes that would require her to secretly meet friends in weird locations. Like the top of this bell tower apparently.”

They reached their destination. Waiting for them was a huge bell that looked as if it had seen many years, the townscape of Mealtars bathed in twilight, and…

“You made it.”

The Imperial princess of the Empire, Lowellmina, her profile red from the sunset. She turned toward them with a smile.

But this time, she wasn’t alone.

There were two more people with her. Their shadows were perfectly still beside the bell.

“Wein! Ninym! Long time no see.”

“It’s been a while.”

Glen Markham.

Strang Nanos.

Wein had spent so much time with them at the academy.

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At first, it had just been Wein and Ninym.

After a while, Strang came into the picture.

“How do you manage to act like that?”

For someone from the provinces, the military academy was basically a cramped camp to Strang. He admired Wein for going down his own path, even when he was facing the nobles.

Then came Glen.

“If I’m gonna beat you, I’ve got to get to know you.”

Glen saw Wein as a worthy opponent, since Wein succeeded in everything he did. Glen had always had pride and purpose as a future soldier of the Empire.

And finally, there was Lowellmina.

“I’m curious about you all. Will you let me observe you?”

Her life as a caged bird, as the daughter of the Emperor, had suffocated her. She was beguiled by Wein’s way of living.

The five had spent many of their days together. Even though their paths had separated, those golden days never faded—

“I never thought the gang would get together again.” Wein laughed, leaning against the rooftop edge. “You’re both looking good, Glen, Strang.”

“You too,” Glen replied with his arms folded. “You disappeared right before graduation. I never thought I’d see you here.”

Strang smiled wryly. “I was surprised…not just because Wein is here.”

“You’ve got that right, Strang… Wein.” Glen gave a harrumph that seemed very intentional. “Don’t you have something to say to us?”

“Hmm…” Wein thought it over for a moment. “Oh yeah. Glen, I was the one who made sure your fiancée got that letter you never sent.”

“That was you—?!” Glen tried to grab Wein.

“I touched up your writing, so it read more flowery and antiquated. You should be thanking me.”

“How could you! She totally expected me to be an expert in classic literature when I went to see her. Do you know how hard it was to keep my cover from being blown?!”

“Let it go, Glen. You only failed because you bit off more than you could chew!”

“That was all your fault—!”

Wein and Glen started going at it.

Strang gave them a sidelong glance. “Well, we already knew neither of you are commoners.”

“Because my regal air can’t be contained!” Wein boasted.

“Yeah, right!”

Strang’s shoulders shook with laughter. “It’s true. You weren’t the least bit regal. But no commoner just understands the etiquette in both sides of the continent or deciphers the Church’s holy texts.”

In this era, it was difficult to learn anything beyond general knowledge. On top of that, those versed in specialized languages and skills were few and far between. It required significant time and money to find these people, offer them proper compensation, and seek their instruction.

The same thing applied to teaching materials. There were no texts that increased in difficulty to match the reading level and abilities of the student. The channels of communication were still primitive, meaning information and experiences were rooted in their immediate surroundings. The works by authors tended to fade into obscurity.

“I thought you were the illegitimate child from some important noble family…not the prince of a foreign nation.”

Ninym interjected. “Just so you know, I’m a normal commoner.”

“Do you hear yourself? You’re the prince’s aide.” Strange shrugged.

Lowellmina cut in. “Anyway, let’s toast.” She took out glasses for everyone. “And guess what? I brought snacks!”

“You came prepared,” Ninym commented.

“I was looking forward to it. When Princess Falanya came in Wein’s stead, I thought we would have to cancel, so I’m happy we could all hang out.”

As Lowellmina cheerfully held out glasses for them, Wein and Glen ceased their fighting. Ninym poured wine for everyone.

“What are we making a toast to?” Wein asked.

Lowellmina already had an answer in mind.

“It should be obvious. All right! Three, two, one!”

“To never-ending work.”

“To the future of the kingdom.”

“To the prosperity of the Empire.”

“To the liberation of the provinces.”

“Hold on!” Lowellmina shouted. “Why’re you all saying different things?!”

“Wein, are you sure you want to toast to a mountain of work?” Ninym confirmed.

“If I’m going to get wine out of it, then why not?”

“Man, you’re still on the whole ‘free the provinces’ thing?” Glen asked Strang.

“I’ll do anything to make it happen.”

“Hmph…!” Lowellmina’s cheeks puffed out in irritation.

Wein lifted his glass. “Just kidding.” He laughed.

“Let’s do it for real this time—to our reunion.”

The four echoed, ““To our reunion.””

Their clear voices bounced across the sunset rooftop.

“Glen. Strang. How’ve you been?” Wein asked after their toast and exchanging pleasantries.

“After graduating from the academy, I entered the military as planned. I serve under Prince Bardloche right now.” Glen sighed. “To be honest, I don’t care about all this factional fighting. Anyone can be the next emperor. I’d still be in the military, fighting for the Empire. But my family and my fiancée’s family side with the middle prince…”

“Hmm, even Glen the Great can’t go against family, huh,” Wein mocked.

Glen snorted. “Hmph, laugh all you want.”

“Pffft! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How sad! Glen, you’re totally uncool—!”

“—GRAAAGH!”

“Whoa?! Weren’t you the one who gave me permission to laugh?!”

“Dammit! Don’t you know what it means to cross a line?”

“Hmm… What could that mean? Who came up with that?”

Strang smiled as the two started going at it once again and returned to the topic. “I’m with Prince Manfred, and I’m currently serving as the acting governor-general in my hometown of Burnoch.”

Ninym cocked her head. “The acting governor-general, huh. You’ve done well for yourself.”

“Remember that rebellion? The top leaders in our town were a part of it. Their heads went flying after the political purge. Even though I was low on the ladder, I’ve found myself in this position.” Strang shrugged. “And since we participated in the rebellion, Burnoch was going to suffer major consequences. Prince Manfred somehow mediated and smoothed things over.”

“So you’re indebted to him.”

“That’s right. Besides, Prince Demetrio is indifferent about the provinces, and Prince Bardloche wants to rule with an iron fist. For that reason, Manfred

has appeal to the weak and disenfranchised. He's dangled independence in front of the provinces, and we want it so bad."

"Do you really think you'll obtain it?"

"Not at all. But more people cling to that dream than you can possibly imagine, Ninym. I want to help my homeland's dreams become reality."

It must be difficult, Ninym thought. It was an admirable act of devotion to serve others over yourself. She would have given him a round of applause…if this hadn't been a conversation between friends.

"It pains me that I can't just invite you to join my faction," Lowellmina grumbled.

Glen and Strang had obligations greater than her own will. To abandon their duties would be the same as throwing half their lives away.

"Looks like the three of you have discussed this already," Ninym noted.

"Yeah. We decided to focus our attention on each of our factions," Strang replied. His eyes narrowed sharply. "Which is why I'm concerned about your nation's policies, Wein. What does Natra plan on doing?"

Wein and Glen stopped their fighting, and the prince straightened up.

"There's only one thing that an honest and virtuous prince of a tiny nation *can* do."

"Honest and virtuous…?" Strang questioned.

"He isn't either of those."

"You mustn't lie, Wein," Lowellmina said.

"…Presiding Judge Ninym! Isn't this slander?!" Wein wailed.

"What? Hmm…"

Lowellmina quietly took out a wooden box. "By the way, Ninym, this is a present for you. There is incense wood inside."

"Oh, I have something for you, too. It's an anthology of Burnoch folktales."

"I brought a self-defense sword made by a friend, a blacksmith. Look at the craftsmanship."

"All parties are not guilty."

"You're accepting bribes right in front of me, Judge!" Wein whined as Ninym expressed her gratitude to each of the offerings.

"Back to the subject at hand," Wein said. "I don't plan on getting chummy with any one prince…for now. Gotta take each horse out for a ride before betting on a winner, right?"

"Won't the one chosen by the rumored crown prince of Natra automatically be the winner?"

“That’s a bit generous. We’re making some headlines, but Natra is a small nation in the north. We don’t have the power to interfere with politics in the Empire.”

“Hmm… Fair point. If you had sided with Lowa, you would have had no reason to speak with the princes.”

It seemed they had learned of his meeting with the two princes.

“By the way, any presents for me?” Wein asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nada.”

“I’m so hurt!”

The boys continued to talk.

Lowellmina secretly whispered, “Ninym, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Could you give me some time to speak with Wein alone?”

“…Fine. But don’t try anything strange.”

It seemed like a good time to wrap up the boys’ conversation.

“Let’s call it a day. The sun is already setting,” Ninym called out.

“Hmm… You got a point. That’s too bad. But I guess I’ve said everything I needed to say,” Glen replied.

Strang nodded. “We’ve decided to fulfill our duties in our current positions. I guess that’s what I’d expected from us.”

Anyone else would have had a hard time understanding. But there was no way amiability and animosity would coexist between them. These five people all felt that way.

“Anyway, Wein, Ninym, it was nice seeing you. Let’s talk more next time,” Strang said.

“Yeah. I don’t know when that will be, but I’ll bring some good wine,” Glen added.

The two headed down the stairs first. Wein went to follow them, but Ninym gave him a look that held him back. He stopped in his tracks. Ninym followed after the men instead.

Wein and Lowellmina were alone on the rooftop. He was the first to speak.

“What’d you wanna talk to me about?”

“Hmm, ‘talk’…? Try ‘consult’ or ‘complain,’” she replied vaguely.

“Okay…” Wein responded. “Finally realize that running a faction sucks?”

“Mmm… Yes…” Lowellmina said, nodding quietly. “I didn’t think it would be this taxing… Everyone acts in their own self-interest, and I have to go to

great lengths just to convince them to back a common policy…" Lowellmina sighed. "But I imagine you have to do something more difficult on a daily basis."

"It'd take three days and nights for me to tell you about my grievances."

"I'm starting to think I should have a bit more respect for you."

"A lot more respect."

"Now that you say that, I'm not sure I can respect you at all…" Lowellmina muttered.

Wein continued on. "I'm guessing there's something else?"

"……"

"Well, I've got a pretty good idea what it is."

Lowellmina remained silent.

"You wanted your brothers to choose the next emperor."

Her shoulders trembled slightly. But she feigned ignorance as if it weren't the least bit true.

"Why would you think that?" she asked. "Everyone knows we won't choose the next emperor during the summit and the true purpose of this event: to establish our dominance and strengthen our own factions by gathering powerful allies in one place. Wouldn't you agree?"

"That's true. Even Bardloche, Manfred, or Demetrio don't believe they'll reach a decision. But you still had faith. It would be strange if you didn't."

"Why?"

"You still haven't declared you're aiming for the throne, Lowa. You're not even up in the running. What did you think this summit would do? Even if everything worked out and you all came to a decision, the odds of you becoming empress are slim to none."

"……"

"Time has always been on your side, Lowa. The people of the Empire will denounce the three princes without you having to do anything. They will rally behind their princess, for the future of the Empire. You don't need to host the summit or speed up the process of deciding the Emperor…because the opposition among the princes means the discussion will come up empty and sway public opinion further in your favor."

Lowellmina had nothing to say as she leaned against the edge of the tower wall. She slid to the ground and hung her head.

"…I'm so uncool."

She wanted to be empress. She wanted to change things. But there were

people who were frightened without a leader. Lowellmina had been unsure whether she should pursue her ambitions if that meant casting her eyes from them.

After worrying and pondering, she'd called the Summit of the Imperial Children to order. She had pretended it was all for superficial reasons—for signaling that the Empire still had it, for strengthening their individual factions. But under it all, she had hoped they would actually decide on an emperor.

"…Wein, give me some words of encouragement."

"Uh, sorry, fresh out."

"Fine. Now that you've heard what I have to say, what's your honest opinion?"

"That you're pretty dumb."

"Damn you…" She glared at him.

Wein smiled. "But hey, it's all good. Aiming for the throne is an emotional journey. It's not rare to be taken off course by your feelings."

He continued. "And don't get down in the dumps. You've got something to think about. What's actually going on with the summit?"

"…I can't give any details, but the prospects are grim. Demetrio has a one-track mind to be the Emperor, making conversations impossible. Meanwhile, Bardloche and Manfred never intended to come to a final decision during the summit."

"Okay. And what are you going to do? Bet on a slim chance? Cast aside the people's desires and throw your hat in the ring?" Wein grinned. It was a smile that was ready to stir the pot. "Just so you know, I wouldn't mind helping out."

"……"

Lowa did not reply. After a long silence, she stood up resolutely.

"It's time that we head back as well. We've tarried here too long."

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Lowellmina passed by Wein and headed for the stairs. Just before she exited, she stopped and turned around.

“Wein.”

“What?”

“I’ll definitely get you mixed up in my business—I won’t lose.” Lowellmina looked at him fondly, and she appeared resolute.

Wein responded with a wry smile and followed her down the stairs.

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Wein and Ninym returned to their manor after parting with their three friends.

“Welcome back, Wein.”

“Hey, Falanya. Back already?”

She had arrived before them, excitedly sharing what she had observed during the assembly. Wein interjected on occasion as they ate dinner together.

Afterward, Wein and Ninym went over their next course of action in his room.

“Our biggest problem is Demetrio.”

Ninym nodded in agreement. “We were able to establish a relationship with Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred during our meeting. And we showed them that we’re not as close to Lowa as they previously thought. If we can become friendly with Prince Demetrio, we will have successfully set ourselves at an equal distance from all of them.”

Except they knew forming a relationship with Demetrio to be difficult. After all, Wein had verbally beat him at their first meeting. Demetrio must have cooled off by now and realized he’d been completely cajoled with sweet words. It’d be no surprise if he was furious.

“Wouldn’t it be better to give up on Demetrio? From what I can see, he’s the farthest from the throne,” Ninym suggested.

“No. If Bardloche and Manfred go down together, there’s a chance he’ll rise to be the Emperor. It would be a different story if there was no chance of that happening. But it’s too early to say.”

“How can we befriend him? You plan on refusing his proposal to Falanya, right?”

“Obviously. Why would I ever entrust my little sister to him?”

“You have a serious sister complex.”

“I’ve got the good kind.”

What's the bad kind? Ninym wondered but kept her mouth shut.

"I've got a few ideas to get on Demetrio's good side. Of course, everything needs to go just right, but let's cross that bridge when we get there."

"In that case, I'll prepare a messenger… Though I imagine he won't reply."

"…Again, we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

Wein and Ninym gave each other meek nods.

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Meanwhile, Prince Bardloche was summarizing his day with a subordinate.

"How was your meeting with Prince Wein?"

"Can't let your guard down," he said frankly. "We weren't together all that long, but he didn't show off his position or accomplishments. I could sense him trying to get the upper hand while observing us the entire time."

"Someone with a level head, it seems."

"I wouldn't say that. He must be the type who can switch between calculating and passionate at the drop of a hat. Nothing like those guys who think they can get by on logic alone."

As the superior martial artist, Bardloche noticed Wein hadn't let his guard down once during the meeting. Even if something unexpected had happened, he would have acted without hesitation.

"I don't think it was a stroke of good fortune that he managed to beat Marden and Cavarin. The rapid ascent of Natra in recent years has to be attributed to the prince."

"If you are praising him, then…?"

"Yeah. We've gotta be careful around him, but I'll manage. Once he's under my command, he'll become a major asset to my military rule."

Bardloche continued on with conviction. "Just you watch, Demetrio, Manfred. I'm going to be the next emperor…!"

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"—What's Bardloche thinking?" Manfred sneered.

The subordinate tilted his head. "Prince Manfred, are you saying Prince Wein isn't worthy of your time?"

"I can tell he's excellent. I mean, his grades at the military academy were so unprecedented that all record of it got totally wiped. He's leading Natra as a

capable regent, a remarkable figure."

"And…"

"That's why we'll *kill* him."

The subordinate's eyes grew wide.

Manfred continued. "I confirmed that during our meeting today. He'll never be satisfied living on his knees under another's rule. If you try to rein him in, he won't just bite off your hand—he'll go for your throat. But he'll only keep getting better with time. If we let him live, he'll become a real threat."

"That's…" The subordinate was surprised but gave no retort.

If that was what Manfred decided, then it would be done.

"We have spies keeping an eye on Demetrio, right?"

"Yes, we managed to infiltrate them successfully. It seems Demetrio has recently lost a few of his pawns, though the specifics are unknown to us. We should be able to move freely now."

Manfred nodded. "Since Demetrio had caused an uproar, I'm guessing Prince Wein will attempt to repair the relationship and pay him a visit. Order our men to kill Wein there."

"Understood… If the prince of an ally nation dies during the meeting, everyone will find Prince Demetrio suspicious."

Manfred smirked. "We'll do away with Prince Wein and destroy Demetrio's reputation. Two birds with one stone. The people of Natra will be enraged, but without Prince Wein, they'll be no threat."

"Understood. I shall make the appropriate preparations…"

The subordinate bowed reverently.

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It was almost surprising that it was so easy to meet with Demetrio again.

The messenger had set out first thing the next morning and returned at noon with a letter accepting Wein's invitation.

"What do you think he could be up to?" Wein asked.

Demetrio was obviously hostile toward Wein. If the Imperial prince was eager to meet up, that gave Wein cause for concern.

"Good question… What if he realized our value as an ally nation and hopes to repair the relationship?"

Wein nodded. It was plausible. Demetrio might not feel this way personally, but there had to be at least a few of his vassals who were worried about

damaging relations. They must have pressured him to respond, which he probably did reluctantly.

She continued. “There’s a chance that he’s prepared something to force you to accept his marriage proposal to Falanya.”

This was also true. Demetrio might have talked about the union with Falanya with his vassals. If they had concocted a plan to stop the marriage between Wein and Lowellmina, it would make sense why Demetrio would be eager to meet up.

“There’s no doubt he’s after something,” she said. “But since we made the request, we can’t go back on it. Let’s proceed carefully.”

Ninym was trying to inspire him, but Wein’s response was rather muted.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just a little sleepy.” Wein yawned.

His trip to Mealtars had been rushed, and he hadn’t been getting enough sleep after his arrival. Wein had too much to do and too much to think about.

“Wein, if you’re that tired…” Ninym touched Wein’s face, but he offered her a small smile.

“Hey, this is nothing. It’s like climbing a mountain. When I’m done with this meeting, I’ll have a lot more time to sleep.”

“If you say so…” Ninym reluctantly nodded, stretching out his cheeks.

“We better hurry and get ready. This is Demetrio we’re talking about. If we’re late, he might faint from rage.”

The two nodded to each other and prepared to head out.

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“I’ve been waiting for you, Prince Wein.”

When Demetrio greeted Wein as he arrived to his manor, the Imperial prince seemed in a good mood.

Guess I should assume he’s got something up his sleeve.

Wein remained cautious as he took a seat in the reception room. Ninym stood as an attendant behind him, and Demetrio was directly across from them.

“Here we are. I imagine you invited me to have a constructive conversation?”

“Of course. Prince Demetrio, I do not think you will be disappointed if you have high expectations.”

Their meeting began with traces of tension in the air between them.

“Come to think of it, I hear you met with my foolish brothers yesterday.”

“I was honored by the opportunity. My trip to Mealtars has been worthwhile

since I have been blessed to meet all the Imperial princes."

"Hmph… I doubt talking with them will gain you anything." Demetrio snorted derisively.

The meeting continued in this way. Demetrio would bring up subjects as if to test him, and Wein would evade the topics while keeping the conversation going. The Imperial prince wanted to have command of the conversation by the time they got to the main discussion. But Wein saw through his act. He chose his words carefully and waited for his opponent to make his move.

Wein waited and waited and waited.

—Why hasn't he come at me yet?

They were ten minutes into the meeting. And the conversation was going nowhere.

Wein groaned inside. If his opponent was still calm, he would think everything was somehow going according to his enemy's plan. However, across from him, Demetrio was visibly agitated. In other words, things weren't going well for him.

What is he doing…?

It couldn't possibly be that Demetrio hadn't come up with anything at all.

Wein continued to scrutinize Demetrio.

On the other side of the conversation, Demetrio was thinking to himself.

—Why hasn't he proposed anything?!

He was fuming.

Wein and Ninym hadn't guessed his intentions correctly.

They had thought Demetrio had responded quickly because he had something up his sleeve. But the Imperial prince had nothing of the sort. After all, his vassals were busy with the summit and negotiating with the nobles of his faction. Plus, Demetrio never believed Wein had pulled one over on him. He thought it was only a matter of time before Wein made demands, which was why Demetrio let him direct the meeting.

He had accepted this discussion because he thought Wein was ready to talk about his union with Falanya.

However, Wein was making no attempt to get to the heart of the matter. And Demetrio was becoming more and more agitated.

Does he plan on taking it easy? Has his meeting with Bardloche and Manfred gotten to his head? He has it all wrong if he thinks that'll get him anywhere. In the end, he's nothing more than the prince of some backwoods nation.

Both parties remained on guard against a nonexistent trump card as they continued to dance around the topic.

The server took away the cold tea, pouring fresh cups and placing one in front of each of them, and tried to leave the room as the two sat wordlessly…

"——Don't move," Wein barked to the server.

"Ngh…"

The server's shoulders trembled, and he turned around.

"Wh-what can I help you with?" The server blinked in surprise.

Demetrio was no different. His eyes darted between them as he wondered what was going on.

"Did you brew this tea?"

"…Yes, but…" The server timidly nodded, seemingly puzzled by this sudden turn of events.

Wein pressed him mercilessly. "Drink it."

"What…? This tea?"

"That's right."

The server looked around the room, but the others said nothing, agape at Wein's strange behavior. Realizing that no help was forthcoming, the server bowed as low as possible.

"With all due respect, that tea has been hand-selected for hosting and entertaining nobles. Someone such as I must not—"

"I said *drink it*," Wein ordered forcefully. It sent chills down the servant's spine. "You should be able to consume it—if there's nothing extra in it."

The attendants in the room finally understood the situation. Wein was implying the tea had been laced with poison.

All eyes turned on the server. With head still bowed, the server gnashed in frustration.

How did he find out…?!

The server was one of Manfred's spies. He had infiltrated Demetrio's domain a few years prior, providing information on his faction. Just the day before, he'd been ordered to kill Wein when he arrived at the meeting.

Wein would naturally be heavily guarded since he was in what was essentially enemy territory. The server chose poison as his method of assassination, and he never thought he'd be found out right before he could finish the job.

Shit! How do I get out of this…?!

He had no way to know that Wein had heightened senses that took note of his

tense hand as he served the tea, his shifty eyes, his gait as he made his leave… After dedicating himself to observing the people in his palace, Wein was quick to notice suspicious behavior.

Wein's eyes honed in on the server's every move.

The prince's mind raced.

Was it Demetrio? No. I don't think he would invite the leader of an ally nation to his residence only to poison him. Would it make more sense if the culprit was either Bardloche or Manfred? They might have perceived me as a threat and tried to get rid of me in Demetrio's manor to place the blame on him.…

Wein quietly signaled Ninym with his hand: *If the server tries to escape or attack, capture him.*

Ninym nodded and subtly readied herself for action.

Neither Wein nor the server made the slightest movement, and the tension mounted—until something happened that no one would have expected.

"—Ha-ha-ha!"

Demetrio suddenly roared with laughter. "I was wondering what was going on. Tea brewed with poison? Ridiculous! You're under the roof of Demetrio, the next emperor! I would never resort to that!"

His spirits seemed to lift as he scorned Wein.

Because this was what he'd wanted to see—proof of Wein's weakness.

"I can't believe you'd lack the courage to drink tea and make false accusations to cover your ass! Hilarious! I don't understand what people see in a coward like you!"

Demetrio was more talkative than usual.

This is bad, Wein thought. From the server's reaction, it was obvious the tea was poisoned. If Demetrio kept this up, he was going to be humiliated.

This was karma. But all signs pointed to Demetrio taking his embarrassment out on Wein. If that happened, their plans to reestablish relations would fail.

"Um, Prince Demetrio? I stand by what I said." Wein tried to quiet Demetrio somehow.

"Hmph. This?"

"Whoa? Ah—"

Demetrio took the cup placed in front of Wein.

"It's totally fine!"

And he downed it in one gulp.

Wein gaped at him. The server and Ninym were caught off guard.

“How about that, Prince Wein? Did you see that? There’s no poison in this…”

…*tea.*

He would have said.

“—Urp.”

But Demetrio collapsed.

“Prince—?!” Wein shouted, when the server started to sprint.

Ninym reacted instantly, but she was a beat late, preoccupied with Demetrio.

The server used that second to weave his way through the attendants and crash through a window to the outside. Ninym clicked her tongue and went to follow him, but Wein held her back.

“Ninym! We need a doctor! Now!”

“Ngh… Understood!”

Ninym raced out of the room.

Wein raised his voice. “Why are you all zoned out?! Split into two teams! One will go after the criminal! The other half needs to help me out! We have to hurry and make him throw up the poison!”

“R-right!” The attendants finally moved into action.

But could they really save Demetrio? What would happen if they couldn’t?

Wein kept frantically working to save the prince’s life, imagining the chaos that was to come.

Chapter 6 | Girl Icon

It took no time at all for news that Prince Demetrio had been poisoned to spread across the city. For better or worse, he had narrowly escaped death. The incident passed from a poison assassination to a failed attempt.

But that didn't mean they could be relieved. Demetrio had yet to fully regain consciousness, and the criminal had not been caught yet. Those employed at the manor trembled with fear that they would be the ones blamed and executed, and the faces of the nobles in his faction turned pale at the thought of their uncertain future. Mayor Cosimo looked as if he might faint from the scandal.

As Wein racked his brains over how to weather through the situation, trouble arrived. The city guards had come running, requesting that everyone in the manor, Wein included, come with them to headquarters for questioning.

"Don't be rude! Do you really think His Highness is the criminal?!"

With Ninym at the forefront, Wein's attendants rose up in opposition. But the guards would not be moved. From their perspective, there was verbal testimony that the perpetrator had escaped, but there was also the possibility that Wein had compelled everyone on the scene to keep their mouths closed.

To restore their lost honor, the guards had to arrest the criminal. Even if he was the prince of a nation, they couldn't let him off the hook so easily.

"There's no other way, huh. I'll go." Wein finally gave in, seeing that arguing would be pointless.

But this led to rumors that Wein had been arrested as the assassin. The gossip of the town began to blow it out of proportion, as people speculated that the attempt on Demetrio's life was the work of Natra and Lowellmina's factions.

"Gweh?!" Wein imagined Lowellmina would cry out in the future when the news reached her ears.

But Wein had been loosely confined under the pretext of obtaining an oral

statement, so he wouldn't be there to hear it.

Three days then passed.

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"I'm finally free!" Wein stretched lightly in front of the headquarters.

He'd just been released a short while beforehand, though they weren't sure if he'd been cleared of all suspicion. But Wein was royalty. There was a chance he'd been freed for political reasons.

Because of this, he had to quickly collect all the information possible that he'd missed in his absence.

"Your Highness!" Ninym came racing toward him. "I apologize for being late…!"

"Don't worry about it. Thanks for coming," Wein told his aide, who he hadn't seen for three days.

He'd left her with the task of noting changes in the city while he was confined.

"With all due respect, your complexion doesn't seem well. Did they treat you unjustly during your confinement…?"

"No, I was just worried about the outside world, and I didn't get much sleep. Sorry to cut to the chase, Ninym, but what's been going on?"

"Yes…well, things are not looking good…"

Ninym proceeded to fill Wein in on the latest events.

The ones to make the first move were Demetrio and those around him.

After escaping death, it seemed he was too scared to stay in his current residence with his hazy memory. The summit was put on hold, and he told his subordinates they would return to his own domain posthaste. Since their lord ordered it, the vassals had no choice but to obey. And everyone knew that Demetrio had actually been poisoned, which was why not a single person objected to leaving Mealtars.

This was all to say Demetrio and his gang of nobles departed the city. The summit had failed to come to a resolution, and everyone fully expected Bardloche and Manfred would also return home with their factions…until they made a surprise move.

They had stationed soldiers in the nearby vicinity, and both besieged

Mealtars.

“This was all Mealtars’s fault.”

“Their plan was to open up relations with the West and assassinate us, the Imperial princes.”

“They unjustly confined our ally—Prince Wein—and attempted to place the blame on him.”

“Immediately open the castle gate and allow my forces to conduct a thorough investigation!”

This was the story according to Bardloche and Manfred. Their objective was clear. Mealtars was a golden goose, but since it had retained a great deal of autonomy, it went unchecked. Their ultimate plan was to take advantage of this faux pas and bring Mealtars under their direct control.

For Mealtars, this was a bolt out of the blue.

They had been in communication with the West during the rebellion, and they had let an Imperial prince get poisoned on their own territory. On top of that, the criminal still hadn’t been caught. *And* they had confined the prince of an ally nation. With everything, Mealtars had found itself caught in a political dilemma.

“Those guys are using me to get their way…” Wein grumbled, back in his temporary manor.

The chair creaked as he leaned back irritably. “By the way, Ninym, who made the first move, Bardloche or Manfred?”

“Manfred mobilized his forces first.”

“In that case, Manfred might have been the one who ordered my assassination… No, I can’t make that call just yet.” Wein mentally compiled the information in his mind. “What about Lowa? Did she leave?”

“She’s still in the city.”

“Oh, that’s surprising. I thought she’d hightail it out of here.”

“You were confined, but the public still thinks that Natra is a part of Lowellmina’s faction. There have been rumors that this assassination attempt was part of her plan. It seems that the city was sieged as she was trying to put out those fires.”

Wein burst into laughter, and she went on.

“She is currently hard at work helping Mayor Cosimo de-escalate the situation. With Falanya.”

“Wait, she’s there?”

“Yes. She was enraged that you were brought to the headquarters of the

guards, but she said she had to calm the city down until you were freed."

Makes sense, Wein thought. There was a lot going on, but it was turning out to be a window of opportunity to foster Falanya's independence.

"Also, Mayor Cosimo sends his apologies regarding your confinement, Wein. Unfortunately, it seems the guards had been unwilling to cooperate with him."

The guards were as close to an army as it would get. They must have had a certain level of clout that prevented Cosimo from ordering them around, which let them imprison Wein of their own accord. After getting chewed out by the princes, they must have realized confining Wein was a bad idea and let him go.

"He says he'd like to meet you to apologize in person. I suspect he'll ask for your assistance to get things under control again."

"Forget the apologies. That's the least of my problems."

Ninym nodded as Wein waved his hand lazily. The situation was tense. They couldn't afford to deal with Cosimo.

"Well, what should we do?"

"Go home!" Wein declared right on the spot. "The summit is a wash. The Imperial princes are outside the city. There's no point in us staying here. In fact, we'll be in major trouble if we don't book it. Once Mealtars opens the castle gate, there's no question that assassins will take advantage of the chaos and come for me."

"Yes, well, that is true…"

The public was aware that Demetrio had been poisoned, but Wein had been the actual target of this assassination plot. It wasn't like they'd give up after a single failed attempt.

"Well, our biggest problem is finding a way to escape," Ninym said.

"Uh-huh…"

The city was surrounded by two armies, and the castle gate was shut tight. Even if they told the soldiers to move it, they weren't going to be greeted in any friendly way.

"How is the siege looking?"

"Bardloche and Manfred have split into north and south to keep each other in check, so there are openings to the east and west of the city. But it's a gamble if we'll manage to get by."

Which meant they would have to spot an unmanned gate and slip between the two armies that stared each other down.

"Still though, whether we'd get any farther than that is a bit of a gamble."

So it was a matter of opening the gap and slipping by while both sides were

glaring at each other. On top of that, Wein needed to keep an eye on the prince who sent the assassin. If they were caught, there was a one-in-two chance that he'd be quietly disposed of.

"Hmm, we're at a real disadvantage here…" Wein flopped onto the desk. "Couldn't we put the screws on Cosimo and get him to tell us about a secret passage? They've gotta have one or two."

"It's possible, but I doubt he'll talk. Cosimo seems to love this city, and I bet he'll risk his own life if it meant he could drag you into this mess."

"C'mon! Give me a break!" Wein moaned. "We've gotta think of a way out of here. If any more trouble finds me here, I'll have exhausted all my moves."

"—Your Highness, I beg your pardon!"

The door opened forcefully, startling Wein and Ninym. It was a subordinate.

"…I don't remember us kicking down doors back home."

"I'm sorry. But we're in a race against time…!"

"What? Have the princes' armies started fighting?"

"No!" The subordinate took a breath. "We've received word that an army bearing the flag of Levetia is approaching on a road from the West!"

I'm sorry. WHAT?!

It felt like his heart had burst into a million pieces.

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"I'm sure they've noticed us by now," the man in the carriage murmured calmly.

It was an oddly large carriage. The horses pulling it along were broad and sturdy. Any questions about its size could be answered with a quick peek inside. The male passenger was so giant that even this coach felt cramped and narrow.

Gruyere Soljest was three times larger than the average person. He was one of the Holy Elites from the west side of the continent and the king of the Soljest Kingdom.

"I'm certain there must be a huge uproar. It is unfortunate that we cannot see it personally," responded the woman sitting across from him.

Her name was Caldmellia, a remarkable figure who had risen to director of the Gospel Bureau, one of the highest positions in the religious order of Levetia.

"I'm surprised…that we're out here leading an army to Mealtars instead of sending a delegation in this situation."

"The circumstances call for it," Caldmellia assured, smiling. "I'm sure all their opinions have gotten muddled, causing everyone to worry. They're all

focusing on the problem in front of them… There is no better moment for us to strike from the sidelines."

Gruyere snorted. "Those poor believers. Getting dragged into your games, and now they're going to die here."

Looking out the window, he could see the soldiers walking along in a systematic fashion. Six thousand of them. All followers of Levetia.

"Games?" Caldmellia asked. "This is a holy war to free Mealtars from Imperial oppression." She smiled at him. "They will return alive. After all, you are their leader, King Gruyere."

While she had been the one who decided to rouse the army and set out for Mealtars, it was Gruyere who was in command.

"Trying to curry my favor? You're the one who got permission from the Holy King to carry out this little prank—and then dragged me out here."

"There was no other way. I could not possibly take control of the army."

Caldmellia was a politician, not a military officer. She had neither the experience nor ability to lead six thousand soldiers.

"Our opponents are the Imperial princes… Anyone else besides you, King Gruyere, will simply not do."

"Hmph… If only they were worth more than their titles. Then they'd be a prey worth hunting." He glared at her. "You'd better not forget, Caldmellia: I only follow the orders of Levetia and the Holy King. I'm not some underling."

Caldmellia was not fazed. "Obviously. I am depending on you, King Gruyere."

She looked out the window.

"Hee-hee, I hope Prince Wein will be pleased to see me."

As she imagined what awaited them, Caldmellia broke into a big smile.

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"Don't come over when I've got my hands full!" Wein screamed with every ounce of his strength. "Seriously? Right now? This is the worst timing! I was just trying to find a way out of here! I don't have time in my schedule to mess around with you! Curse you, Caldmellia!"

"Calm down, Wein."

"How can I?! I thought she'd send a delegation, but she dragged the whole damn army along with her…! I should have burned her manor to the ground before we escaped the capital of Cavarin…!"

“I understand, but we have to move now and think later,” Ninym urged, attempting to calm her enraged master. “It’s crucial we pick up the pace and figure out our course of action.”

“All we can do is get out of here as fast as possible.” Wein was looking agitated. “The siege on the city is causing the citizens enough stress. Now that Levetia is involved, it’s only a matter of time before the city revolts.”

“There are thirty thousand people in Mealtars. If there’s an uprising, the guards won’t stand a chance.”

“And then before we know it, the castle gates will be flung open, the army will storm in, and the whole city will descend into madness. If we don’t get out before that, we’ll be in serious trouble.”

They might have been able to do something if they were in Natra with their own forces on hand. But right now, Wein was just a representative of a delegation residing in a foreign nation.

“I’m way over my head with this one. It’ll be impossible to turn this around. We’re out of time and tricks. Ninym, call Falanya back. We’re going to need Nanaki.”

“Understood. I’ll contact them.”

“And I’m sure Lowa wants to get out of here, too. Please help her out…”

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His body started to tremble uncontrollably.

"Wein?"

"Sorry… Guess I'm a little tired. Let me lie down for a minute." He tried to get up, but his knees buckled.

Crap! This is bad… I'm going to fall. His body lurched.

"Ninym, prepare our escape—"

But before he could finish, Wein's body crashed to the floor.

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Five days had passed since Bardloche's and Manfred's armies surrounded Mealtars.

"They're more tenacious than I expected," Manfred murmured as he gazed at the city walls.

He was in the camp that his men had pieced together. His subordinates gathered around him, and the mood was heavy.

"This is still Imperial territory. The guards might be able to hold out against our troops, but I don't think it'll be possible for them to stand their ground as forces approach from the West."

A subordinate seemed to be talking to himself. "It seems Princess Lowellmina, Mayor Cosimo, and Princess Falanya of Natra are still in the city. Their outreach to the people is preventing the citizens from going wild."

"I wonder if that will be enough to stop them… Whatever. It's only a matter of time."

This situation had been a stroke of luck for Manfred. When Demetrio had been poisoned instead of Wein, even the youngest prince turned pale.

But after his brother left the city, Manfred knew what he had to do. Since the summit was going nowhere, he would switch policies. Rather than win over Mealtars, he'd take advantage of the misstep, claim that it was perfectly within his rights to deploy his army, and bend the city to his will using force.

I can't stop Bardloche from aligning himself with me. But I'll have to decide a way to get rid of him and make sure my army is the only one left to enter the city. I hope I'll be able to oust Levetia after that.

For Manfred, this new army made things complicated. Their men were lined up on a hill to the west that wasn't far from Mealtars, proclaiming they would break up the siege and liberate the city.

I bet they were waiting for an opportunity since the very beginning.

It was almost fortunate that the religious troop seemed to be in no hurry to resort to force. They were stationed at the top of the hill, keeping a close eye on new developments.

This was in part because Manfred and Bardloche each had seven thousand soldiers, while they only had six thousand. Although the western border was nearby, this was still in Imperial territory. If push came to shove, the princes could call for reinforcements.

They may not have a valid reason to act.

They were after liberation. They didn't want to show any aggression without due cause. Manfred guessed they wanted the princes to subject the people of Mealtars.

How annoying… But I guess it comes with some advantages. Now that they're here, I've got the perfect fodder to get Mealtars.

What would be the best course of action?

Manfred could sense someone outside.

"Pardon me!" A messenger appeared in the command post.

"Your Highness, I have just received a report from my men within the castle town."

"Have they made a move?"

"Well…"

When he heard the full report, Manfred gaped in surprise.

"Prince Wein has collapsed…?"

At the same time, Bardloche received this report in a position south of Manfred's army.

"Prince Wein is unconscious…and in critical condition?"

"Yes, word has been spreading through the city."

Bardloche thought for a moment. "The guards of Mealtars supposedly arrested him. Could he have been tortured…?"

"He appears to have returned to his manor after his release. It is possible he could have been tortured during his confinement, though we don't know the exact details. If he was the original target for the assassination, it's possible he's finally been poisoned."

"…Let's hope he makes a full recovery. I know he'll serve me well in the future. It'd be a waste to let him die," muttered Bardloche honestly.

The messenger continued. "There is one more matter. Our army is gaining a

bad reputation within the city."

"Really?"

"Yes. They say that our soldiers lack discipline and that civilians will be massacred if the city is taken over."

"Are they idiots? If we could do that, we would have already."

Mealtars was a golden goose. Even Bardloche knew that was thanks to the people residing in the city. If they slaughtered the citizens, they would essentially kill their cash cow. Bardloche and Manfred both knew a single drop of blood didn't need to be spilled if Mealtars willingly pledged their allegiance.

"This must be one of Manfred's schemes. Send out agents to put an end to the rumors about us. We need to start believable lies about Manfred's army."

"Understood!" The messenger dashed outside.

Bardloche muttered to himself as he put together the situation in his mind.

"We need to crush Manfred's army in the north. We'll smash the zealots in the west. And then we'll seize Mealtars… No need to make things complicated. The plan is simple."

As soon as Mealtars made a move, so would he. All he had to do was wait. Bardloche continued to focus on the city like a carnivore targeting its prey.

The news of Wein's condition reached Glen under Bardloche's banner and Strang in Manfred's camp. But their reactions were different from the two princes' responses.

"He isn't one to just die," Glen commented.

"I can tell there's something else going on if this news is public."

The two had the same thought at the same time. A strange occurrence.

""Wein, you must be up to something, huh—?""

Three days later, the situation began to change, as if following their predictions.

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"…Boring," Gruyere grumbled as he munched on a piece of fruit in the camp.

It had been a few days since they arrived at this location that overlooked Mealtars and gotten into formation. The situation hadn't changed since they got there. The princes still had the city under siege, and the army of zealots

continued to observe from the hill.

“Can’t we just attack already, Caldmellia?”

“It’s not time yet, King Gruyere,” she answered, holding a book in one hand. “We need a reason to fight. We must wait until the castle gate opens, until the two princes rush in, until the chaos unfolds.

“Besides,” Caldmellia continued, “didn’t you want to avoid taking on both princes at once?”

Their army of six thousand was outnumbered by a thousand by both princes. Manfred and Bardloche had gathered about fourteen thousand men. It was overkill to fight Mealtars, since it didn’t have a decent army. But it showed that they were serious about this.

Though the brothers were at each other’s throats, there was a decent possibility that they would team up against Levetia before taking the city. If that happened, the princes would have twice as much power. It was better to try and avoid it altogether.

Caldmellia never expected Gruyere to grumble about this.

“You’re worrying over nothing,” he claimed. “They’re two brats fighting each other. Even if they’re up against a common enemy, they won’t try to cooperate. They’ll be focused on tripping each other up. They’re no match for me, even with twice the manpower.”

“My,” sighed Caldmellia in genuine surprise.

Gruyere was more sincere than his looks made him out to be. He’d never exaggerate his own abilities. If he said he could do it, then it must be true.

“Now I’m starting to feel conflicted… But with all the recent developments, we ought to wait it out.”

Gruyere sighed dramatically. He seemed dissatisfied, though it wasn’t enough to oppose Caldmellia’s orders.

“If you’re bored, would you like to read this book?”

“What is it? …*The Dignity of Imperial Court*?”

“It is popular among the noble families in the West. Have you heard of it?”

“I don’t think so. But I can see them recommending this. I doubt it’s any good.”

Caldmellia chuckled at his brazenness. “To summarize, this book was written to degrade and undermine noble families. It’s rare for a title to be this ironic.”

“Oh? Are you going to burn it?”

“No. I think I will try and spread its message.”

Gruyere showed her a baffled frown, but it didn’t take him long to

understand. “…The masses will seek God’s salvation if their current masters squander their power and abandon their scruples.”

“Perhaps.” Caldmellia beamed.

Gruyere clicked his tongue.

If the ideas in that book took off, the faith of Levetia would spread to more territories.

That said, Levetia tended to select kings and dukes as Holy Elites, which meant it was more rooted in the earthly realm than other religions. If this book managed to weaken the foothold of royal families and the nobility, the values of Levetia would spread through the continent, and the townspeople would rise to power within the organization. Meaning they would band together. Meaning they would flock to Caldmellia, an average citizen just like them.

“…You witch. My greatest regret was that I didn’t kill you when we first met.”

“Hee-hee. You should watch your step, King Gruyere. Or you might not notice a small fire spreading under you.”

They glared at each other. You could cut the tension with a knife.

But that was flipped on its head by a third party.

“Incoming—!” cried a voice outside.

A soldier appeared before the two.

“I—I have a report! We’ve confirmed that the castle gate to Mealtars is open!”

“Hmm? Did they finally wear out?” asked Gruyere.

“Then we must move quickly.”

Caldmellia and Gruyere immediately began to switch gears.

But the messenger sounded mournful. “P-please wait!”

“What? There’s more?”

“Yes…the castle gate is open, the people of Mealtars are leaving…and they’re heading this way…!”

Oh, Gruyere thought with a sigh.

It wasn’t rare to see civilians flee when a city was in a desperate situation. It wouldn’t be a problem if they came to their camp to request aid. After all, they had brought mountains of food and supplies to pacify the city after their army managed to chase off the princes.

“Warmly welcome them in when they arrive. It would make a more favorable impression if we send out some of our men to greet them. How many are coming this way?” Caldmellia asked.

The messenger paused for a beat.

"…All of them."

Caldmellia and Gruyere exchanged looks when they couldn't comprehend.

The messenger stared at both of them.

"Thirty thousand people… All the citizens of Mealtars!"

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It was a sight unlike any other.

Walking in a straight line were men and women, young and old civilians. They weren't heading to the north, south, or east. All of them were marching toward the west.

Whenever they took a collective step forward, the earth rumbled, even though they were just civilians.

"To think I'd ever see such a thing…" Mayor Cosimo murmured in awe, feeling the vibrations in the soles of his feet.

He had participated in this march with his family. Even though he was the mayor, he stayed toward the back…because he wasn't their leader.

Someone else was in charge of this parade.

The figure leading the citizens of Mealtars reflected in his eyes. Cosimo could see her as she raised her voice in encouragement as they pressed forward.

"You never fail to surprise me…Princess Falanya."

The crown princess of Natra, Falanya Elk Arbalest.

She was the leader of these thirty thousand civilians.

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"What is that?! What's going on?!"

Manfred's camp had fallen into literal chaos.

The castle gate was wide open. There wasn't anything particularly weird about that. He'd anticipated a portion of the citizens would flow out.

But who would have thought *all* of them would be coming out?

Why? …You know what? I don't even care about that. I need to focus on how to respond! How do I go about this…?!

Manfred had a few options. There was no one to protect the mobilized citizens. There were a few members of the march who looked like guards to keep the line in formation. If his army overpowered them, he could somehow

halt their procession.

This march meant the city had become an empty husk. If he used his forces to gain control, Mealtars would be his.

This city is a golden goose but only because of its merchants! Which should I take: the people or the city…?!

Manfred was in anguish. It would be the best of both worlds if he could seize both Mealtars and its citizens. But if he attempted to capture the people, the religious zealots of Levetia would start to mobilize their troops from the other side of the hill. But if he tried to take the city, Bardloche's army would fight to secure it for themselves.

I could take advantage of this abnormal situation. Could I work with Bardloche to secure the people and drive out Levetia…?! Think! Dammit! Figure it out! They'll get the jump on you if you're careless!

Manfred's mind raced. But an even bigger bomb was dropped on him.

"We have a report from our scouts in the city! A battle has broken out in the city between our men and Bardloche's army!"

"What?!" Manfred boomed. "Who the hell are they following? I haven't given the order to attack yet!"

"It's already started, so I was unable to ascertain the details! But our forces are not faring well!"

What? Manfred felt like stamping his foot. All that held him back was his princely pride and uncanniness of this changing situation.

My camp has always been a rabble of emerging nobles. I don't have complete command of them. It's plausible that some of my men have run wild in pursuit of glory. But—

It was too soon. The entire population of Mealtars had only just left the city…but the army surrounding its walls had managed to make their way inside *and* fight Bardloche's soldiers. Something about their actions seemed intentional. If anything, he had reason to think they had been inside the city the entire time—

"Your Highness! What shall we do?!"

"We'll lose the city if we don't send in more men!" Manfred managed to bark out when his subordinate called out to him.

There was no time for thought. Now that a battle had broken out, there was no chance that the two brothers could join hands. If they fought against Levetia while trying to secure the citizens, Bardloche would take the city and stab him in the back.

There was only one option left.

"…We'll aid our forces! Storm the city!" Manfred shouted, tamping down the bad feeling that lingered in his chest.

On the other side, things were relatively calm in Bardloche's camp. After all, he had an organized group of experienced soldiers. He'd been surprised to see the citizens abandon their home, but it didn't take him long to regain his composure.

"Your Highness, we should prioritize the city!"

"I agree. We don't know what the people are thinking, but if we can secure Mealtars, we will be able to accomplish the rest somehow!"

Bardloche listened to his subordinates' opinions, but his expression was strained.

I can sense someone else is trying to pull the strings… Should we really try to take the city?

He was thinking back on the failed assassination of Demetrio, the appearance of Levetia, the sudden mobilization of the citizens. It had all been unexpected.

Of course, it could have been a series of unrelated coincidences. But *if* someone was acting behind the scenes, they'd be expecting the princes to prioritize capturing the city. It was possible this was all a trap. He had no evidence of this. It was his intuition. Their best course of action was to stay put and observe the situation from a bird's-eye view. Bardloche knew this was true…until a report came to cancel out his assumptions.

"Your Highness! We've just received a report that our forces and Manfred's men are fighting in the city!"

"What?"

The news caused everyone to stir.

Bardloche followed up with a question of his own. "Did our soldiers decide to act on their own?"

"We could not confirm that. However, the situation appears to be in our favor."

"……"

Bardloche was overcome with an odd sensation.

Most of Manfred's army consisted of the nouveau riche and their retinues. It would not be strange for them to act impetuously for a shot at personal glory.

Bardloche's army, however, consisted mostly of active soldiers. They adhered to a strict code of discipline. And it was odd that no one knew who

started the scuffle. It made no sense to keep their identities quiet if they were after recognition.

But the situation changed before he could clear those suspicions.

“Your Highness! Manfred is mobilizing his army! It seems they plan on capturing the city!”

“Tch…!” Bardloche clicked his tongue. At this rate, he couldn’t sit still any longer.

“We’ll advance and take the city before Manfred!”

“Princess Lowellmina, your predictions are coming true. Your brothers’ armies have started to mobilize,” Fyshe reported.

Lowellmina nodded in satisfaction. She was in Cosimo’s manor within the now empty city. The citizens had all left.

“Have the disguised soldiers withdrawn?”

“Yes. A while ago.”

The battle between Bardloche’s and Manfred’s men was a performance orchestrated by Lowellmina’s own army.

They outfitted themselves with appropriate uniforms and equipment and made sure to send back eyewitness accounts to their respective camps. Once she confirmed that her brothers’ troops had begun to move, she quickly withdrew. This had been the plan all along.

“Your Highness, please escape through the underground passage. The city is on the brink of pandemonium.”

“Yes. Let us have faith that they will be successful,” Lowellmina murmured to herself, looking west.

In the headquarters, Gruyere laughed heartily.

“How delightful! I’m almost troubled by my joy!”

Messengers from Mealtars had just arrived. Their declaration was simple: Their citizens had come to request their aid. They knew Levetia was there to save them all from Imperial oppression. Nothing more.

Thirty thousand people. There had to be people who were too sickly to walk. Instead of leaving them behind, the civilians had placed them in carriages as they approached the army.

Needless to say, this was reckless.

They needed to parse out so much information. Who came up with this plan? How did they carry it out?

But they had to figure out another matter first.

“What are we going to do, Caldmellia? We’re not equipped to care for thirty thousand people.”

Gruyere had a point.

They had prepared supplies to feed the citizens once the occupation of the city was complete. But providing room and board for everyone was absolutely impossible. Their surplus resources would be gone within three days. Running out of essential goods while fighting against the enemy was nothing short of a nightmare.

But it would be hard to turn them down. After all, Levetia had come to save the people of Mealtars. That was why the soldiers were there. If they refused the citizens and lost their cause, their morale would crumble to nothing.

If there was any solution—

“King Gruyere.”

“You’ve got to be *kidding me*.” Gruyere spoke before she could say another word. “You’re not thinking they’re pagans who want to destroy our army from the inside, right? You don’t think they’re pretending to ask for help. You would never imagine we should deploy our troops to destroy them first.”

“…Never.”

“Thank goodness. I would have run home in fear if that’s what you were implying.” Gruyere smirked. He knew she couldn’t lead the army without him, and it made him confident.

“What a quandary…” Caldmellia sighed, though she started to smile.

It wasn’t because she was certain they would win. It was just her disposition. Everything about this situation had brought her closer to climax, including this adversity and the surrounding dilemma.

“—If anything troubles you, I would be delighted to lend a helping hand.”

Her fun with him had only just begun.

“It’s been a while, Lady Caldmellia, King Gruyere.”

Wein Salema Arbalest flashed them a carefree smile.

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To return to a few days prior…

“——?!”

Wein shot out of bed as soon as he became conscious again. He scanned the room and caught sight of a person. It was Ninym, who had been waiting in the room.

“Ninym, what’s going—?”

“Wein!”

“Gweh,” Wein let out as Ninym pounced on him before he could understand the situation.

“I’m so relieved! You’re finally awake!”

“Now that my body has had a taste of what it needs, I’ve never been sleepier…”

Ninym had partially pushed him down, and Wein sat up as she clung to him tightly.

“I’m sorry. That was my fault. I knew you were exhausted, and I…”

“No, I thought I could still keep going. I didn’t listen to any of your warnings until I actually collapsed. I guess I went a little overboard this time arou—” Wein stopped mid-sentence.

Ninym started sobbing as she buried her face in his chest.

“Thank goodness… I don’t know what I’d do if you never woke up, Wein…” she whispered, voice trembling. Looking at her now, few would have imagined the way she practically radiated courage on a regular basis.

Even the healthiest people could fall victim to a fatal illness. The upper crust of society was not exempt from the laws of nature.

Ninym’s tears seemed to show just how much she’d worried about him while he had been out.

She seemed more fragile than the most delicate glasswork. For a moment, he wasn’t sure where to place his hands, but they eventually found their way to her hair, gently pressing her head against his.

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“Hey, don’t cry. I never know what to do when you’re like this,” he murmured, running his fingers through her white strands.

“…Then don’t push yourself,” she whispered.

“That is, um, well, it’s kinda hard to guarantee that… Ow!” She had pinched his back. “O-okay. I’ll take better care of myself next time. I’m sorry.”

“…Apology not accepted.” Ninym rubbed her cheek against Wein’s chest. “Just…let me stay like this for a little longer.”

Wein said nothing and continued to stroke her hair.

Ninym had stopped crying, making way for a comfortable silence between them. But that was interrupted by…Wein’s growling stomach.

“…Wein, turn around for a second.”

He obliged and faced away from her. She pulled away from him, straightening herself.

Ninym finally gave him the okay. “First, you have to eat. I’ll have something prepared immediately.”

When he looked at her over his shoulder, Ninym was as collected as ever. He pretended not to notice the slight redness around her eyes.

“You don’t have to bring it all the way here. I can just go to the—”

“No. Rest. I’ll get angry if you leave this room.”

He appreciated her concern. And he wasn’t completely back to his usual self. But he needed to know something before he resigned himself to doing the bare minimum.

“Ninym, what happened after I passed out? Are things calming down?”

“Things could have been worse. I’ll explain in detail when I return.”

“Got it. I’ll wait here. Please hurry. I’m starving.”

Ninym broke into a small smile. “Leave it to me. I’ll be just a minute.”

She turned on her heel and left the room.

“Wein!”

After he had finished eating and Ninym had filled him in on the details, two more visitors filed into their room: his little sister, Falanya, and Princess Lowellmina.

“I’m so glad you’re all right!”

“Sorry about that, Falanya. I’m okay now.”

She rushed toward him, and Wein smiled as he held her close. He directed his grin behind her, too.

“You have my thanks, Princess Lowellmina. It seems you’ve been taking care of Falanya while I was unconscious.”

“Think nothing of it. I’m pleased that we could join forces in these troubled times.”

For a moment, Wein looked at Lowellmina in her eyes. That was enough for Wein to understand her intentions, and he silently instructed Ninym with his hand.

“Princess Falanya, let me prepare you a fresh set of clothes. There is a great deal to talk about, but that can come later.”

“Ah, you’re right. Wein, I’ll see you later.”

Falanya and Ninym left the room. Now that there was no reason to keep up appearances, Lowellmina spoke.

“How much did you hear from Ninym?”

“Basically everything that happened since I passed out… Is Falanya really…?”

“Yes. I was surprised. I never thought she would become a support system for the people of Mealtars.”

It all began in the citizens’ assembly. The people were floored by Bardloche’s and Manfred’s actions, when they demanded the city open their gates. This was naturally reflected during the assembly. They were locked in separate arguments: admonishing the guards, making Cosimo take responsibility, surrendering to the princes’ demands, insisting on absolute resistance, calling for Western aid.

Anyone could see that fear was their driving force. The assembly hall was packed, and they were starting to get emotional. When they failed to agree to a plan, they began to take low blows, exchanging jeers and taking violent measures. They were starting to think the renowned citizens’ assembly of Mealtars was going to fall apart.

It was then that Falanya decided to participate in their debates.

If the city riots, it’ll be particularly dangerous for Wein, who’s confined to his room at the moment…

Her brother had his hands tied. It was up to her to stop the city from breaking into mayhem. She knew her purpose.

Falanya stood behind the podium. The people in the hall stopped their shouting and mysteriously quieted.

“—This city is in dire straits.”

Her voice was as crisp as the spring breeze, a welcome respite.

“But we cannot let our hearts grow anxious. We must not fight with our neighbors. What we need is unity.”

Even when all several hundred eyes turned to Falanya, she did not flinch.

“You are all merchants from Mealtars, the greatest city on the continent for trade. You use your wit to make your own path. If all thirty thousand merchants band together, there is no situation that you can’t overcome.”

She took a breath. “You have the greatest minds. We need your talent to light the path forward!”

Falanya’s speech was not long at all. But as soon as she finished, her audience regained their composure. They kept their emotions in check, making sure their opinions remained constructive even when discussions grew heated.

After that day, Falanya began to address them daily. She grew more heated after Wein collapsed. Her voice became fuller. They were captured by her gestures. Her audience swelled in number to the point where they could barely fit in the assembly hall. When it reached capacity, she began delivering her talks in front of the building. And when even that became too cramped, they moved to a larger venue.

“At this point, Mayor Cosimo and I have decided to fully back her. The mayor’s approval rating has dropped, since the responsibility of this problem naturally falls on him. The citizens are suspicious of me because I colluded with him to organize the summit in the first place. And I am the sister of the princes now besieging their city.”

They had placed someone with an untarnished reputation at the forefront to bring the people together, drawing attention away from themselves. This plan had been quite successful. Falanya had been accepted by the people of Mealtars.

“I hate saying this, but I can’t believe she hasn’t been crushed by the weight of this situation…”

The pressure on Falanya had to be enormous. It hadn’t been too long ago when she’d been a bird in a cage. Wein was floored that she had been able to endure it.

“That is true. You know, she told me she felt like throwing up on multiple occasions.”

“Hey! That’s when you should have stopped her.”

“I tried. But she refused to listen.”

Wein felt like he’d just heard about someone who worked themselves to the bone, paying no attention to warnings.

It was him.

“Like brother, like sister…”

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing. I never thought Falanya would go that far…”

“Mayor Cosimo and I are very grateful. She is the reason there hasn’t been a revolt.”

“Tell her that in person.”

Lowellmina smiled without humor. “You’re right. I will… I have to tell you one thing: It seems there is an escape passage beneath the mayor’s house. Please use it to return home.”

Wein’s eyes narrowed. “Is this how you show your gratitude?”

“You may see it that way if you wish,” Lowellmina said with a nod. She sighed. “We’ve managed to maintain order in the city, but I’ve made no progress negotiating with my brothers stationed around the city. I imagine they will start to grow impatient soon. They’ll launch an attack any day now. I must help my savior escape before that happens.”

“……”

“The people support Princess Falanya, and she is inextricably enmeshed in the affairs of Mealtars. I think she will refuse even if you tell her to escape. Which is why, Wein, I ask for your cooperation.”

“…What are you planning, Lowa?”

“To hang on until the very last minute. That is my responsibility.”

There were hints of exhaustion on her smiling profile. She must have been busy trying to break the deadlock.

Wein was silent for a moment. “Lowa, what’s the worst possible scenario for you at this point?”

That had come out of the blue.

Lowa thought about it. “…For Mealtars to fall into the hands of the West. I don’t care who takes control of the city—as long as it’s not them.”

“Then *this* should work,” Wein said cryptically. “I know it’ll be a gamble, but will you go along with my plan?”

“…What do you have in mind?”

Wein grinned.

“You’re going to make Falanya an icon.”

After that day, there were more rumors in the city than ever.

Some said Bardloche was planning to make the city a frontline base against

the West and that Manfred was going to lead the merchants with an iron fist.

Others said that Prince Wein had been poisoned by both princes to prevent him from making accusations against the city.

Every piece of gossip stirred the fears of the citizens, increasing their distrust of the princes' armies.

"Mealtars has been at the center of Imperial conquest."

Falanya projected her voice before an audience of over three thousand people.

"Even now, we suffer sleepless nights, afraid of the princes. They do not have sound minds. Any discussions won't persuade them. Tragedy will befall the city!"

The people listened with bated breath. From a short distance away, Wein, Ninym, and Lowellmina looked on in secret.

"…I wonder if this will work," Ninym murmured as she stared at Falanya.

The princess was flanked with guards, but they were outnumbered by the citizens. Ninym couldn't help thinking about the worst that would happen.

"We don't have the natural disposition to coexist with fear," Wein said.

Ninym tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"We respond with aggression, defensiveness, evasion, analysis…when we face fear. It helps us feel better. Even in heated discussion at the assembly. They can't not take action against their fears. Their hearts can't take it."

Wein had concocted the rumors in the city to rouse their panic. However, they were under siege, which meant they had nowhere to run. They didn't have the power to fight back or defend themselves. All could see their future was despair.

"Which is when Princess Falanya reaches out to them. How wicked…" Lowellmina commented.

"Supply and demand. The basics of business."

Falanya was providing the citizens exactly what the people desired, making the temptation hard to resist. They didn't even think anything about her presence anymore. She had become part of them.

"I can see the citizens of Mealtars worship Princess Falanya. But will it work?"

"It will," Wein answered. "She doesn't need to persuade all of them. In a city of this size, three thousand citizens will be enough to drag in the rest. Falanya can definitely persuade that many people. Look." Wein urged them to look at Falanya.

While the three had been talking, she had reached the climax of her speech.

Why had things turned out this way? Falanya thought to herself whenever she looked back at recent events.

She had initially come to Mealtars in Wein's place to greet the Imperial princes. Then things spiraled out of control. One of the princes proposed to her. Her brother had come to the city, even though he was supposed to be back home. The prince was nearly assassinated. Wein was arrested. The other two princes were now laying siege on Mealtars.

She wanted to ease their worries somehow…and before she knew it, she was speaking before an audience of three thousand.

—*How did this happen?* Falanya tried to think, standing at the podium as she continued her speech.

And on top of that…she had to do something in front of an audience of this size.

After all, Wein had given her the orders.

"Think of Mealtars as a leather bag brimming with water. If external pressure continues to mount, it is only a matter of time before it bursts. But what do you think will happen if we poke a hole in that bag?" Wein had asked her before her speech.

"The water will trickle out, preventing it from exploding."

"Exactly. And on top of that, we can decide where and how to open the hole. In other words, we can control the direction of the pour. We need to take advantage of this."

Falanya gaped at him when she processed this information.

"D-do you really think I can pull that off?"

Wein grinned. "Obviously—I believe in you, Falanya. I'm sure you'll be fine."

That was enough for Falanya to resolve to stand before the people.

Wein said she could do this. He had told her to believe in herself. In that case, she had no doubts.

I can do it… Y-yeah, you got this, Falanya…!

She could see their inner thoughts, noted their hearts moving. She knew how to speak to them.

"The princes cannot discuss this among themselves anymore! But we don't have the power to fight them until the bitter end!"

That was common knowledge. They wanted to know what to do next.

“Will this spell the end for Mealtars?! No! There is one road to survival!”

She was going to tell them—proclaim a way to break the deadlock, an answer to the people’s prayers.

Falanya took a breath and made her declaration.

“We need to abandon this city! I propose that every citizen leave its territory and join me in requesting the protection of the religious army of Levetia!”

The audience started to stir immediately. That much was expected. Very few people would voluntarily up and abandon their homes simply because someone asked, no matter where they lived. Falanya had thought it was ludicrous when she first heard the plan herself.

But this was the proverbial puncture in the bag. This was what Wein wanted. Falanya’s only job was to make that hole as wide as possible.

“Is Mealtars just something on the main road in the center of the continent? No! Is it just a city? No!” Falanya shouted, crushing their worries.

“Mealtars is made up of the people! Its territory and this city are just decorations that uplift its citizens! Wherever you go will be Mealtars! Whether it be a deserted island or the farthest ends of the ocean!”

Falanya’s vocal cords felt like they were fraying. There was palpable charge in the air. It was no illusion. The citizens before her had become heated.

“The princes don’t know the true value of the city. If they want its land and buildings, we will let them have it! We will laugh as they gloat over conquering this empty husk! Meanwhile, we will seek a new land with new trading partners and flourish!”

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It wouldn’t be long before she had to say it. Her arms and legs cramped up from nerves, but Falanya began to talk louder as she gestured with even greater force.

“If the people of Mealtars band together, we can overcome all adversity and rebuild this city! We are not escaping but taking a step toward victory! Cast off our old baggage! An era of new prosperity is upon us!”

She took a breath.

“We will march forward—together!”

A bead of sweat trailing down her cheek fell to the ground. The citizens in front of her were silent. The mood was completely different, and sensing that change made her blood run cold. A chill ran down her spine when she thought she failed.

At that moment, someone in the audience called out, “Together!”

Another voice joined them. Two turned to five, and five turned to ten.

“Together!”

“Together!”

“For victory!”

“For new prosperity!”

“For progress!”

“For progress!”

There wasn’t even space for a moment of silence. Their cries grew more urgent. In the end, cheers erupted in the hall, blasting across the city like an earthquake.

Falanya felt faint from nerves, exhaustion, and the fresh feeling of victory. She finally considered her speech a success.

“This is…”

“Tremendous, I dare say…”

The audience roared with energy.

Even Ninym and Lowellmina felt a surge of inspiration, though they had only planned on observing her speech.

“Wein, by the way this is going…”

“Falanya was perfect.” Wein grinned. “Our part comes next. By maintaining this momentum, we’ll rile up thirty thousand citizens and get everyone out of the city.”

“…I pity Levetia, since they’ll be facing all these people,” Lowellmina said.

“Hey now. They came to help Mealtars. Why not take them up on their offer

and depend on their aid as much as possible?”

With Falanya as their emblem, the citizens joined in and began their mass migration.

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Back to the present.

As the representative of the thirty thousand citizens, Wein stood together with Cosimo as they confronted Caldmellia and Gruyere.

“What a strange coincidence. I’m surprised to see you two here.” Wein tried to hold back his smile.

Caldmellia returned one in kind. “Yes. When I heard that the greatest minds of the Empire would be gathered here, I thought you might be attending, Crown Prince. However, I never imagined we would meet like this.”

“…Why are *you* representing Mealtars?” Gruyere asked. “You’re the crown prince of Natra. They’ve got nothing to do with you.”

“All due to a series of complex circumstances. Of course, Mayor Cosimo is well aware that I’ve taken up this position, and there is no need for concern.”

As their eyes fell on him, Cosimo nodded. Gruyere posed no further questions, seemingly satisfied.

“That aside, I wish to extend my thanks on behalf of the people of Mealtars,” Wein said as he slightly bowed his head. “With your aid, all the citizens have managed to escape the city. Your offer to take in thirty thousand people has showed me the generosity of Levetia.”

“Of course. We always wish to aid the oppressed. I’m pleased that we have been able to save the people from the tyrannical rule of the Empire.”

Caldmellia’s response was flawless.

“Well then,” Wein said. “I would like to confirm one thing about your plans, now that you’ve taken us in—”

Cosimo’s heart felt like it might burst from the tension at any moment.

Calm down… You can handle this…

When he heard the news about the failed assassination attempt on Demetrio, his knees had nearly given out from under him. His mayoral duty and love for his hometown were the only two things that had kept him standing. He was obviously going to be the target of blame. He needed to focus on maintaining his political position in Mealtars.

But it didn’t take long for the situation to spiral out of control. The prince of an ally nation had been taken into custody because of his failure to persuade the guards. The assassin had not been captured. He had to deal with the two Imperial princes who were threatening him to surrender the city—or else.

He should have been the one leading the princes by the nose and appraising their abilities, but the tables had turned. He was now on the defensive.

He’d been able to keep the city from running wild with cooperation from Princess Lowellmina and Princess Falanya. But the crucial negotiations with the princes hadn’t been going well. In the end, they’d exhausted all their options…or so he’d thought.

“We’ll rouse the citizens of Mealtars and crush the plans of all three armies laying siege to the city.”

When Wein had come to him with this suggestion, Cosimo’s jaw had dropped. His proposal was to do something at an unbelievable scale.

Cosimo managed to fearfully ask him why.

“Why are you cooperating with us…?”

Wein was part of the delegation from Natra. Not only were they not from Mealtars, they weren’t even from the Empire. No one would blame them for escaping through the underground passages. But here they were, attempting to cross a dangerous bridge for Mealtars, which made Cosimo suspicious as to whether it was really out of a sense of justice or benevolence.

Wein’s answer was simple.

“Falanya is crazy about this town. As her big brother, it’s my job to make sure my little sister comes home in a good mood.”

It hadn’t seemed like a lie or a ruse. It was like he was taking a gamble and getting involved to spare his sister’s feelings.

Cosimo thought it was absurd. But at the same time, he felt a euphoria that he hadn’t experienced in a long time.

Reminds me of my younger days when I would weigh my life and gold on a scale…

Cosimo was a seasoned merchant. He’d seen his fair share of dangerous situations. That experience said it all: Now was the time to put his life on the line once again.

I’ve placed my bet on Prince Wein! Now I must wait and see how this plays out…!

Reluctant to miss even a second, Cosimo focused intently on the meeting.

“Our plans?” Caldmellia repeated, looking troubled. “To drive back the princes who are fighting for the control of the city and liberate it. Isn’t that right, King Gruyere?”

“Mmm…” Gruyere grunted when he was roped into the conversation.

After all, he *had* claimed they could beat the two princes with a small army, especially with the bloodbath happening in the city as their two armies clashed. If they stepped in at the right time, they might easily win.

…If they had enough supplies.

On the other hand, if they took thirty thousand refuges into their care, their resources would only last a few days. Reinforcements would resupply them, but they would run out long before that could happen.

Without adequate supplies, there was no saying how the situation would pan out. If they were stuck in the city for a war of attrition, Levetia would starve to death first.

“…Yeah, that’s the plan.”

But if Gruyere was honest to a fault, Wein would know all his weaknesses. Gruyere’s answer was taciturn.

“Is that so?” Wein saw right through his expression. “I have been talking over the details with the citizens. You have already helped us escape the city. We will not impose on you any longer. That would be ungracious.”

“…No need to hold back. But what would you do if you left our protection? Hypothetically.”

“We would take the city back ourselves.”

Caldmellia’s and Gruyere’s eyes widened.

Wein continued. “Therefore, I want you to sell me your extra weapons, food, and supplies at three times the price.”

What will you do, Caldmellia?

Wein’s plan was to empty the city, which would cause the princes to fight over it and weaken their troops. Then he would purchase weapons from Levetia and wear their army down. All the while, the refugees would be transformed into a militia, and they would hurry back to the city and try to negotiate with the exhausted armies of both princes.

Anyone who heard this plan would undoubtedly claim it was ludicrous. But the first steps had already gone well.

The princes are chipping away their stamina. After taking in the people of Mealtars, Levetia won’t have much time left. I bet they want to go home as soon

as possible.

Of course, the army of Levetia had a reputation to uphold. If they declared they would liberate the oppressed city only to sell their weapons and return home, they would be scorned.

"I am aware that you will not be swayed by money, since you act in accordance with the divine will of God. But I ask that you remember Mealtars is a merchant city. A coin is a symbol of good faith. I would prefer to pay you somehow."

He would buy their honor with gold.

"As soon as we get the city back, we will erect a stone monument to symbolize your goodwill and build a large temple. Mealtars is a strategic point that connects the East and West. I think these new additions would attract more followers."

In other words, Wein was implying he'd offer them money and reputation, in exchange for leaving their weapons and food then going home.

"I see," Caldmellia murmured to herself.

If he's imposing the refugees on us while proposing this plan, that must mean he has no other options.

If Caldmellia was a pious believer from the bottom of her heart, she wouldn't take the deal. She would see this holy war through to the very end.

But she was a politician. She understood that taking in the refugees would destroy her initial plan. Even if they stayed behind, they'd only incur further injury.

How wonderful! Forcing us to consider taking in the entire population of the city? You've exceeded my wildest expectations, Prince Wein, she commended.

—That is why I have no choice but to refuse you.

And then she chuckled.

Across from her, Wein twitched with narrowed eyes. That sent a chill down Caldmellia's spine.

How fun! I want to play with him more—to deny him, to frustrate him, to feel upset, to hurt everyone, to widen the wound and make a big mess! I want to see how he'll respond!

Heaps of people would die. The earth would be drenched in blood. She might even die herself. But that was okay.

After all, it was more fun that way—

"I accept."

“——What?” Caldmellia slowly turned her head toward the voice next to her. “…King Gruyere, what did you just say?”

“I said I would accept, Director Caldmellia of the Gospel Bureau.”

They stared each other down. There was a frightening specter of death residing in Caldmellia’s eyes.

“I believe I’m the one responsible for this matter.”

“And I’m in charge of the army. And I say we accept his proposal.”

He knew it would be better to call it quits. They were already at a disadvantage, *and* they were in Imperial territory. It was possible that Prince Demetrio’s army would hear about the situation and come back.

If we stick it out, we might be able to fold the residents of the city into our army. But Prince Wein might use his people to trip us up and prolong the war.

Which had been Caldmellia’s hope.

But Gruyere had no intention of going along with her eccentricities.

“Oh dear…”

Caldmellia knew Gruyere was stubborn. After thinking it over, she seemed to speak with resignation. “…We will sell you only the surplus. Until we can confirm the citizens have reclaimed the city, our formation will remain intact.”

“Fine by me.”

“I agree.”

Wein smiled and held out his hand. “Thank you for your cooperation, Director Caldmellia, King Gruyere.”

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Within the walls of Mealtars, fights had broken out between the two armies of both princes.

Both had divided their forces between taking control of the city and striking the enemy from the outside. The battle was spreading on both fronts.

Obviously, Prince Bardloche held the upper hand outside the city. While Prince Manfred fought hard, his forces’ true talents lay elsewhere.

On the other hand, Manfred had the advantage within the castle walls. That was because he had secretly gathered intelligence on the city’s layout beforehand and shared it with his subordinates. His troops made use of the defensive equipment on hand and successfully repelled many of Bardloche’s soldiers.

In this push and shove, Glen raised his voice at the fringes of the battlefield

outside the city.

“All units, follow me! We’ll smash through their defenses!”

““Yes, sir!””

Led by Glen on horseback, the soldiers rushed forward and pierced through enemy lines like an arrow.

“The man at the front is their leader! Stop him!” the enemy shouted, but Glen mowed them down with his large sword.

“You think you can slow us down?!”

Glen pushed in deeper and moved past two lines of soldiers—then three.

“Captain! We’re going to break through and reach the back!”

“Okay! We’ll take our formation and—”

Glen suddenly stopped his horse.

“Captain?!” The subordinate turned around to check if something had happened.

Glen glared ahead of them for a few seconds. “…We’re changing the direction of our advance! We’ll come at them from their flanks!”

“What? …A-all units, follow the captain!”

Glen’s forces suddenly turned their heels and headed in another direction.

From behind the forces that had been Glen’s initial target, Strang looked on at the situation.

“…I guess he noticed. I was so close.”

Strang had strategically deployed a weaker formation for Glen to rip through. His plan had been to draw the main force in and catch them in a trap at the back of the formation.

“That’s fine. Now Glen has veered to the side. Tell the main unit to advance twenty steps and place more pressure on the battlefield.”

“Understood!”

Strang considered his strategy as he barked out his orders.

It’s not looking good…

He had already known they were at a disadvantage fighting Bardloche’s army head-on. They seemed to be holding out within the walls, but that wouldn’t last much longer.

Should I suggest retreating while damage is minimal…? I’m not sure how Levetia will react if they know they have a chance to come out on top…

Strang glanced to the west.

“—Hmm?” He saw a few thousand people coming down from the hill.

“Levetia is moving… No! Wait! Is that…?!”

He was wrong. Levetia was still in formation on top of the hill. And the people descending the hill were touting…the flag of Mealtars.

"…Huh! You're really something, Wein!" Strang shouted.

"Send a message to Prince Manfred! Prepare for a cease-fire! The golden goose has returned to talk!"

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"Will you actually be able to arm and mobilize the citizens of Mealtars? We want to drive the princes' armies back."

"Yeah, no," Wein answered Lowellmina frankly before they put their plan into action. "We've got fifteen thousand men out of thirty thousand people. Subtract the children, the elderly, the lazy, and anyone else who doesn't want to cooperate. We'll be lucky if we have even five thousand. *And* they're almost all merchants with zero combat experience. We'll be able to buy enough weapons from Levetia to arm three thousand soldiers. But even then we won't pose a serious challenge to the enemy.

"Then…"

"But it'll *still be a battle*," Wein said. "The princes see the people of Mealtars as their cash cows. When they realize lost lives mean lost profit, they won't want to fight us. Plus, the princes are in the middle of a heated battle. They can't just order their soldiers to capture the murderous men of Mealtars."

"……"

"And the unwounded soldiers of Levetia are backing the citizens. This will really put a thorn in the princes' sides. They'll lose no matter what they do." Wein grinned.

"Meaning they'll have no choice but to deal with our sinister wiles—"

The sun set, making space for a brief moment of silence in Mealtars.

A cease-fire had been signed. Both of the princes set up camp in a location more distant to the city. Under the condition that they kept the castle gate open, the citizens were allowed to return to their homes.

"…That was something, Prince Wein."

They were in a room in Cosimo's manor. Present were five men and women: Lowellmina, Bardloche, Manfred, Cosimo, and Wein.

"Never thought you'd go so far for a meeting," Bardloche said odiously.

Manfred didn’t miss a beat. “You came right when our stamina was flagging from fighting against each other. It sounds simple enough, but I’m surprised.”

He tried to flash his pompous smile, but it had no energy to it.

“How do you plan to make us lay down our arms?” Manfred asked.

Wein shook his head. “There seems to be a misunderstanding between us.”

“What?”

Wein continued on. “Why did you have to fight against Mealtars in the first place?”

“Why? That’s because of…”

“The failed assassination attempt on Prince Demetrio. Was that orchestrated by Mealtars?”

Both princes gaped at him.

It had been widely accepted that was an excuse to attack the city. But Wein was unconvinced and trying to hint at the truth.

“First, I have not been unjustly imprisoned. As you can see, I am free.”

“…Yes.”

They wouldn’t be in this current situation if he’d truly been imprisoned. Bardloche gnashed his teeth.

“Next, there is no reason to believe they are conspiring with the West. It’s true that they have in the past, but that governor-general has already been judged for these deeds.”

“That’s strange,” Manfred pointed out. “In that case, why is Levetia still in formation on the western hill? The people of Mealtars came streaming down from their direction. Isn’t that proof that they’re working together?”

Wein smiled. “No, that was all me.”

What? Both princes seemed confused.

“It appears the rumors of my confinement reached the West. I am a candidate to become one of the Holy Elite, after all. They were concerned for my welfare. It made sense that they would use this opportunity to try and save the people of Mealtars as well.”

Those were some serious mental gymnastics.

But this was the plan that had been cosigned by Wein and Caldmellia’s group. After all, it would give them more credibility to say they had come to save the merchants *and* rescue a candidate for an important position.

“…What about the failed assassination? They haven’t caught the criminal,” Bardloche said.

“Don’t tell me you think Bardloche or I did it,” Manfred warned brazenly.

His brother scowled, daring Wein to talk his way out of this one.

Wein flashed the two of them a smile. “About that. Something stood out to me the whole time: How did the criminal do it?”

“…What do you mean?”

“I talked it over with Mayor Cosimo. The city guards are impeccable. Plus you have private security at your manors. It’d be unrealistic to expect an assassin to slip through them.

“Except,” Wein went on. “There’s only one person who could stand a chance. And that isn’t me, Mayor Cosimo, Prince Bardloche, Prince Manfred, or Princess Lowellmina.”

Manfred gasped. “…It can’t be.”

Wein nodded. “Yes—It was set up by Prince Demetrio himself. That is the truth.”

Bardloche stood up and shouted. “Don’t play dumb! Why would he do that?!”

“To bring us to this very point. The reputation of Mealtars has plummeted. Your armies are tired and sustained losses. If Prince Demetrio returned with his army right now, he could drive you out of here without much hassle. Which would leave him with Mealtars and the throne.”

Wein didn’t think this was the truth. He was fairly certain that he must have been the target of this assassination attempt even though Demetrio had managed to get himself poisoned.

“I was shocked when Prince Wein explained the situation to me,” Lowellmina admitted. “But I believe it to be true. Demetrio must have had no intention to participate in the summit from the very beginning. That’s why he was so unresponsive during our discussions and continued to assert his right to the throne… Wouldn’t you both agree?”

The princes finally saw the full picture.

It can’t be. They’re putting all the blame… one thought.

…On Demetrio…?! the other finished.

Ding! Ding! Ding! Exactly! Wein smirked inside. *Neither of you wanted the summit to go well. That’s what you’ve been banking on since the beginning. You need someone to blame for its failure.*

The Summit of the Imperial Children was a gathering of leaders. If absolutely nothing came of it, the attendees of the ceremony and the citizens of the Empire would be exasperated. There needed to be an acceptable reason why it didn’t turn out well.

And Wein was going to make Demetrio take the fall for everything: the pointless summit, the wasted assassination attempt, the fight between the two princes, bad weather.

He was basically asking to conspire together to make it a reality.

At any rate, Demetrio wasn't in the room. While he had the right to be present, he was the only one who had returned home. And he couldn't refute anything if he wasn't there.

"…Mealtars has prepared adequate compensation for you for this unnecessary fight. We will refrain from pursuing any further relationship with Prince Demetrio," Cosimo said quietly.

It was a declaration that they would pay back the money used for the battle and not side with Prince Demetrio.

…*If I reject this plan*, Bardloche thought, *Manfred will do the opposite and go along with them. On the other hand, there's no way Demetrio would try joining up with me. He's a lone wolf.*

Manfred was next to him thinking the same thing.

Even if I turn this down, pair up with Bardloche, and capture Mealtars, it'll just break out in another struggle. Then Demetrio would actually be the one who wins in this situation. But I've just fought against Bardloche. It would be hard to establish friendly relations now.

The two continued to think long and hard…until they reached a conclusion. Oddly enough, it was the same one.

"…Fair enough."

"I have no objections."

Wein grinned in satisfaction.

"I thought you two might say that."

A few days later, Bardloche, Manfred, and Lowellmina made a joint statement announcing the failure of the summit. They all criticized Demetrio as the cause. Although he obviously denied this, this caused his power to significantly wane.

After a long series of events, the Summit of the Imperial Children finally reached a temporary conclusion.

Epilogue

The clamor outside could be heard through the open window.

Cosimo knew it was the sound of the city under renovation. Mealtars had suffered significant property damage from the battle. But the merchants saw it as an opportunity, busy gathering construction materials instead of lamenting the state of affairs. It wouldn't take long for the city to get back on its feet, better than ever.

"This must embody the indomitable spirit of merchants," someone commented, sitting beside him.

It was Lowellmina, who turned her ear toward the noise outside.

"I doubt the people of Mealtars will ever lose sight of that." Cosimo offered a smile before bowing his head. "I apologize for causing you trouble throughout this matter, Princess Lowellmina. With the summit cut short, I am more aware of my own inadequacy than ever."

"Don't be so critical of yourself. You could have never anticipated this turn of events." Lowellmina smiled. "Besides, Mealtars has sided with my faction."

This recent uproar was starting to make people think that it was time to review the powers that Mealtars had been granted. They imagined a later discussion would settle the level of Imperial interference allowed in the territory. But they knew they wouldn't be able to buy their freedom as they had in the past.

Following Demetrio the Mastermind, Bardloche and Manfred kept their distance from the city that they had once surrounded and attacked. Therefore, they could only look to Lowellmina for protection.

She continued. "Though that's just the official stance. I know the people have their hearts elsewhere. But this is enough for me."

She was right. The citizens weren't obsessed with her. When they closed

their eyes, they saw the small back of a younger girl.

"…This has made me realize something: A king is not measured by strength alone."

Cosimo said slowly, "All across the continent, there have been sparks of ingenuity—starting with the Imperial princes, Prince Wein to the north, and those in higher positions of Levetia in the West… I've also heard there is someone in the South who has been rising to power."

His voice was coated in emotion. "Future generations might one day recall this upheaval gave rise to a single great king—"

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"Geez… That was rough."

In the same office as always, Wein splayed across his desk upon safely returning home.

"Good work. This was a hard one."

Ninym would normally admonish him to get his act together.

But since collapsing from overwork, he was getting treated with more tolerance.

"No kidding. I'd figured I'd play nice with the princes, but I could have never guessed what happened…"

His head was the only thing that turned toward Ninym.

"Come to think of it, where's our hero of the hour—Falanya?"

"Completely burned out. I imagine she'll be that way for a while."

Falanya also wouldn't have guessed this turn of events for other reasons. Who could have ever imagined that the sheltered princess of a tiny nation would speak in front of over three thousand citizens on her very first diplomatic mission? Not to mention marching at the forefront of thirty thousand people?

Every cell in her body was exhausted, now that she knew her work was complete.

Wein thought it was better to leave her be until she recovered.

"Let's go over what we got out of this: Princess Falanya is more independent. We got to meet with the princes. Mealtars owes us a favor. Am I missing anything?" Ninym asked.

When the Natra delegation prepared to head home, Cosimo came to see them off, bowing to Wein deeply.

"I shall never forget everything that you have done for our city. A merchant

always balances the scales. We will repay you for your kindness."

He had expressed a sentiment shared by many citizens. If there ever came a day, there was no doubt each and every one would rush to aid Natra.

"Except Mealtars is an Imperial territory, far away. We have no idea if we will ever have the chance to take them up on it," she amended.

Wein laughed when Ninym shrugged.

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it… Oh, we gained something else of a more personal nature," he told her.

"What might that be?"

"Gruyere. The Holy Elite." Wein looked pleased as he raised his face. "We didn't have much time together, but you could actually have a discussion with the guy—not like Caldmellia. No harm in having him on our side to create ties with the West."

"I have no objections to increasing our number of allies, but…don't forget he's a Holy Elite."

"It'll be fine. I can't be careless, but he's in his right mind. It's not like he has no common sense. You'll see—once we exchange some envoys." Wein stood by his statement.

Ninym tilted her head and wondered if things were really all right.

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"You start to seek stranger things for amusement once you really set your heart on entertaining yourself," Gruyere said as he sat surrounded by plates of food in his palace. "Eating is just a dull task. It's not for fun. My favorite pastime is battle."

He gulped down the chunk of mutton in his hand, bones and all. The vassals around him weren't disturbed at this bizarre sight.

"This incident confirmed that prince is a rare beast—the only one of its kind."

"Your Majesty, that's…"

"Yes. He's a better toy than that old witch." His eyes burned with excitement.

"Just you wait, Prince Wein. I'll sell my soul if it means eating you up—"

When one story ended, another began.

Another shadow of chaos had begun to loom over Wein.

Afterword

It has been a while. I'm Toru Toba. Thank you very much for picking up this fourth volume of *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)*

The theme was… You guessed it! Little sisters! I imagine people were waiting for the spotlight to shine on the protagonist's sister, Falanya. She's made her own appearances in the past volumes, but I encourage you to read this one to see her in the limelight.

Incidentally, the Heisei Era has ended, marking the start of the Reiwa Era.

I imagine just about every other author is writing the same thing in their afterword. All the avid readers must be sick of reading about this. But I want to use this opportunity to turn over a new leaf and reflect on my goals.

Well, I haven't been able to come up with anything yet. I guess coming up with a goal will be my first goal… Maybe I'll have something by the time I start working on the fifth volume.

I would like to take this time to express my gratitude.

To my editor, Ohara. Thank you for all your help. Your advice has helped me refine the plot to avoid telling a story that's cliché.

To my illustrator, Falmaro. Thank you for the beautiful illustrations. I was delighted to see Falanya making all these expressions. She is the cutest. When the third color insert came in, everyone on the team screamed about how sparkly

she was.

Finally, I would like to thank all my readers. With your support, I’m happy to announce that there will be a manga adaptation for this series. I aspire to make more content for you to enjoy.

In the upcoming volume, I’m thinking about focusing on the West. I anticipate Princess Zenovia from the previous volume will make another appearance, along with some interesting twists and turns. I hope you’re looking forward to reading it.

That’s all for now. Let’s meet again in the next volume.

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